ANN SHERIDAN

AND THE

SIGN OF THE SPHINX

AUTHORIZED EDITION

ANN SHERIDAN
and the
Sign of the Sphinx

By

KATHRYN HEISENFELT

Visiting an old friend in Coreyville, Ann Sheridan enters Tess Whitehouse's exclusive beauty salon and stumbles into one of the weirdest tales of mystery. Caught in the whirl of events, Ann finds herself and her friend Crunch risking their very lives in an attempt to save the life of a dear friend.

Ann Sheridan of the red hair and hazel eyes came from Denton, Texas, to Hollywood to become one of the leading ladies in the movie colony. Since the advent of the war, Ann has been doing her stint of camp shows both here and overseas. In her overseas jaunts she visited the South Pacific and C.B.I. war theaters. Now a Warner Brothers star, Ann came to Hollywood by way of the beauty queen route and has since proved her ability as one of our leading actresses.

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Ann Sheridan

and the

Sign of the Sphinx

An original story featuring
ANN SHERIDAN
famous motion picture star
as the heroine

By KATHRYN HEISENFELT

Illustrated by
HENRY E. VALLELY

Authorized Edition

WHITMAN PUBLISHING COMPANY
RACINE, WISCONSIN

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*Except the authorized use of the name of Ann Sheridan,
all names, events, places, and characters
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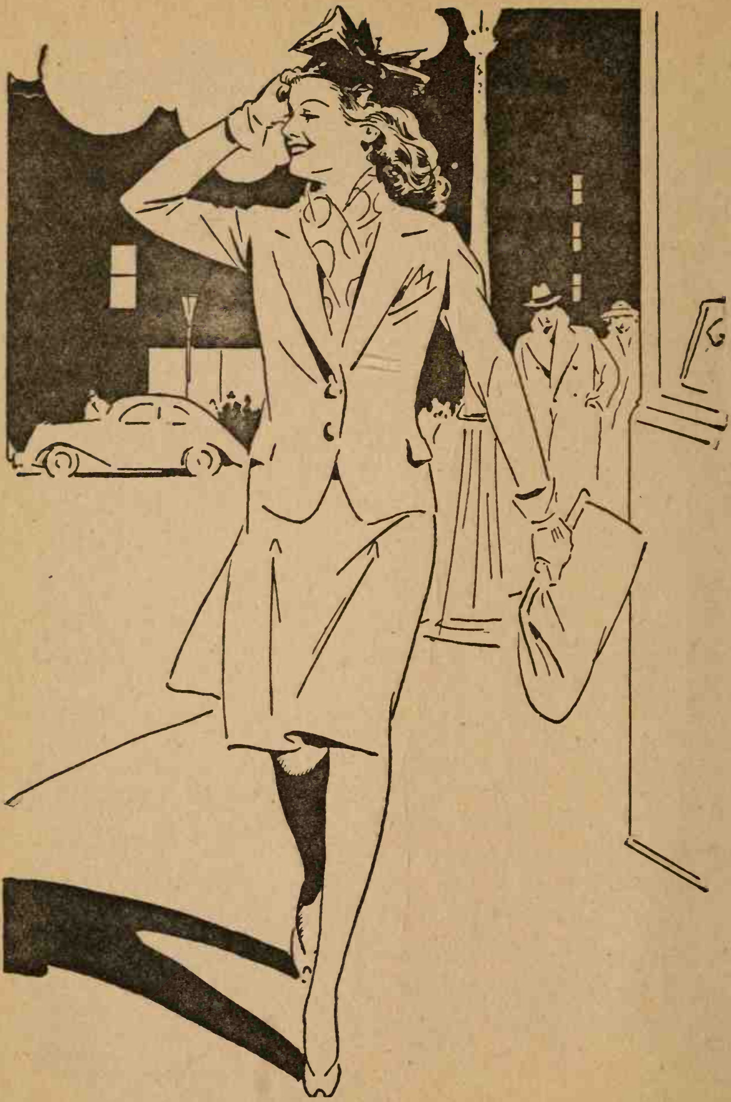


She Braved the Ferocity of the Wind

ANN SHERIDAN
and the
Sign of the Sphinx

CHAPTER ONE

A SUBSTITUTE

If it were dark and the lights were on, the neon display would be much more effective. But even now, swaying from the suspended black bar, it did have the look of an old sampler. Since she turned the last corner, Ann Sheridan had kept her eyes on it, eagerly, expectantly. She thought to herself, "Tess has come up another notch in the world. And I'm glad—glad!"

Again, braving the ferocity of the wind, she was forced to bend her head, to put her free hand to the small blue hat atop the gold-spun hair that fell almost to her shoulders. In her left hand, her spacious bag was cradled against her side. The gold tweed suit, with its short fitted jacket and wide striped scarf, was intended for lamb-like weather. But March in Coreyville, Ann decided emphatically, was on the lion side.

With a scattering of the town's stauncher citizens, engaged as she was in withstanding the buffeting of the gale, Ann strode along the sidewalk, past the swinging doors that led into the Cole Hotel, past the florist's window, a haven of dainty loveliness, past the sunken entrance to what she fleetingly read as Ye Book Nook. And then the girl was almost under the electric sampler, the bright rectangle which was intended to look as though it had been done in cross-stitch. There were several clusters of austere, bright flowers and large, square letters which spelled the name, TESS WHITEHOUSE.

A smile stole over the girl's lovely, full mouth, and danced in the amber eyes as she paused for a moment, looking upward. But only for a moment. Ann was impatient to go inside, to see her friend.

Swiftly, she took a mental photograph of the exterior of the building before her. It was white, of course. Ann knew it would be. And it looked less like a place of business than any of the shops along the way—more like a house. Tess always carried out the idea of her name, a white house. From the first two rooms, which had been her location in Cooper City, to this last venture, Ann remembered the whiteness, the hominess. "It's a beautiful business," Tess Whitehouse would say. Ann first heard her saying that when she was a wide-eyed child of seven. And Tess Whitehouse had said it ever since, for it was a beautiful business, one which expanded and grew with the years, but which continued to serve the needs of women who sought beauty of form, of feature, and of something more—of personality.

Tess Whitehouse gave unstintingly from the seemingly endless reservoir of her own generous, kindly soul. Tess, no longer young herself, gave youth, gave beauty, gave courage to women in every walk of life. Ann knew this, though she had not seen the lady in several years, not since Tess Whitehouse had moved here to Coreyville. But she knew—Tess was Tess, and her Whitehouse would always be the same!

Ann, therefore, saw this dazzlingly immaculate entrance before her with a singing heart. Tess had definitely come into her own. Tess had earned a just reward.

In that quick moment, Ann appreciated the wide windows on either side of the entrance. Delicate curtains criss-crossed like lacy clouds, and spilled on innumerable glass shelves, like so many brilliant colorful stars, were fragile glass bottles, jars, pots with ivy.

Ann breathed an ecstatic, "Ooooh!" but the wind caught it up, brushed the word from her lips. Bending her head swiftly once more, Ann put her hand against the door and went inside.

The door seemed to suck itself shut, closing with a smart sound. It was as though the wind had said, "At last you had the sense to go inside. Now, stay there!"

A little laugh grew in Ann's throat, and she leaned for a moment with her back to the door, looking about her. It was another world from the windswept streets, a place of peace, a gentle, comforting, sweet-smelling place. Ann sensed, rather than saw, the muted colors in the walls. They were lavish, but softly subdued. There were several slender chairs, a sofa tufted in pink and lavender flowers. To the right, a winding stairway swirled up and out of sight. The rail was white, the carpeting dusty blue. Ann's eyes came down again, took in the room which led beyond this entrance way. There was a rounded arch, and through it a generous and billowy flounced dressing table waited with innumerable bottles, jars and boxes, all white, all seemingly embroidered in cross-stitch. There was no particular period about the place. It was simply Tess's white house, an oasis of loveliness in a dry, workaday desert. Rather, Ann told herself, this was the entrance to the establishment.

Tess was on the air three times a week, telling a hungry women's world where to find nourishment. She had often talked about her Whitehouse. Ann knew it was in the shape of the letter "T." The entrance was the base of the letter. The top was the second floor of almost the whole business block.

There were curtains in the rounded arch at the end of the room. A smooth, cerise-tipped hand appeared, drawing them back, and a girl came into view. She was about Ann's height, her hair a red mop, but by no means neglected. Here was a well-cared-for carelessness, prescribed, no doubt, by Tess herself. Tess suited the mode to the woman, not the woman to the mode. The girl was smiling. Her eyes were greenish-blue, and there were flecks of green in the simple suit she wore. Ann's eyes took her in quickly, and when the girl said, in a softly throaty voice, "Terribly windy, isn't it?" Ann thought to herself, "I like her!"

She said, returning the smile, "Terribly!" Her hand went to her hair, brushing it back from her cheek. "I feel definitely blowsy."

"You don't look—," the girl began and stopped. Recognition came into the green eyes, a lighting, welcome look. "Why—you're Ann—!"

Ann interrupted quickly, "Yes." She came nearer to the girl. "This is just a personal visit," she confided quickly. "I mean—no fanfare. I'm a friend of Tess's—Miss Whitehouse. Is she in?"

"Y-yes." The girl glanced upward. "I think so. At least, I haven't seen her going out."

"Shall I go on up?"

"Why—why, yes, I suppose you could. But maybe—." Again the girl paused. A change had come into the green eyes, clouding them. The girl seemed to draw back into her own thoughts.

The door to the street opened, and almost immediately closed sharply. Both the girls turned. Ann saw the tall woman in the fur jacket only fleetingly, but the green-eyed girl seemed to welcome her almost more graciously than was necessary. "Mrs. Henderson," she said. "You're to go right on up. Sylvia's ready for you."

"Thank you," the woman said, and mounted the blue steps.

Ann was watching the girl at her side. She felt a twinge of coming disappointment. Coreyville had been a good hundred miles out of her way, but the hope of seeing Tess had induced her to make the effort. Travel was not simple, and this trip, strictly a pleasure one, had weighed on Ann's conscience. But she was out "doing her bit," she told herself, feeling a little let-down. Seeing Tess would brighten things, make her forthcoming appearances more alive, more worthwhile in the long run.

And now, maybe Tess had gone out. If the girl were in the alcove with the dressing table, Tess might very easily come down the stairs, go out onto the street.

The tall woman had disappeared. There were soft voices from overhead, but below, in this cameo-like little entrance room, there was an awkward, strained silence.

Ann thought, "She doesn't want me to go up and see for myself. I wonder why? Maybe Tess is in. She's not sure."

She said aloud, "Wouldn't it be all right to go up?"

The green eyes did not meet hers directly. The girl was unsure of herself, ill at ease. She said, at last, "I'll run up and see. Would you please wait here?" One hand indicated the sofa.

But before she could leave, Ann's hand was on the girl's arm. Ann said, "Nothing's happened to Tess, has it? She isn't ill—or—?"

"Ill—?" The green eyes came wide open. "Oh, no. Miss Whitehouse is quite all right." She was edging away. "If you'll please wait, I'll hurry."

Footsteps, coming swiftly down the stairs, drew their united attention. Ann was nearest to where the bend in the stairway widened, and she knew, before the green-eyed girl, that Tess Whitehouse was coming from the upper floor.

The lovely ankles, the jeweled pumps. The carbon-blue crepe frock. The bronze gloves and bag, and lastly, the bronze hat with its wide upstanding bow. That was what Tess Whitehouse wore, but it was her face Ann strove to see, and to search. For one with hair so dark, Tess had a radiantly fair skin. Brows, arched high as nature intended, were twin bows over warm brown eyes. Her mouth was like the wing of a bird, far away, two sweet curves, and Tess did not need to paint on the sweetness. No new lines were in her face, no lines at all, Ann saw with a rising heart. But Tess was white beneath the gentle touch of cheek rouge.

Coming to the foot of the stairs, Tess Whitehouse looked for the green-eyed girl, but found Ann facing her. The dark brows lifted. Life came into the dark eyes. The bronze gloves stretched out joyously and the well-remembered, husky rich voice was a caress.

"Ann—! Ann, my dear! Oh, I'm glad to see you!"

"Tess—! You look marvelous!"

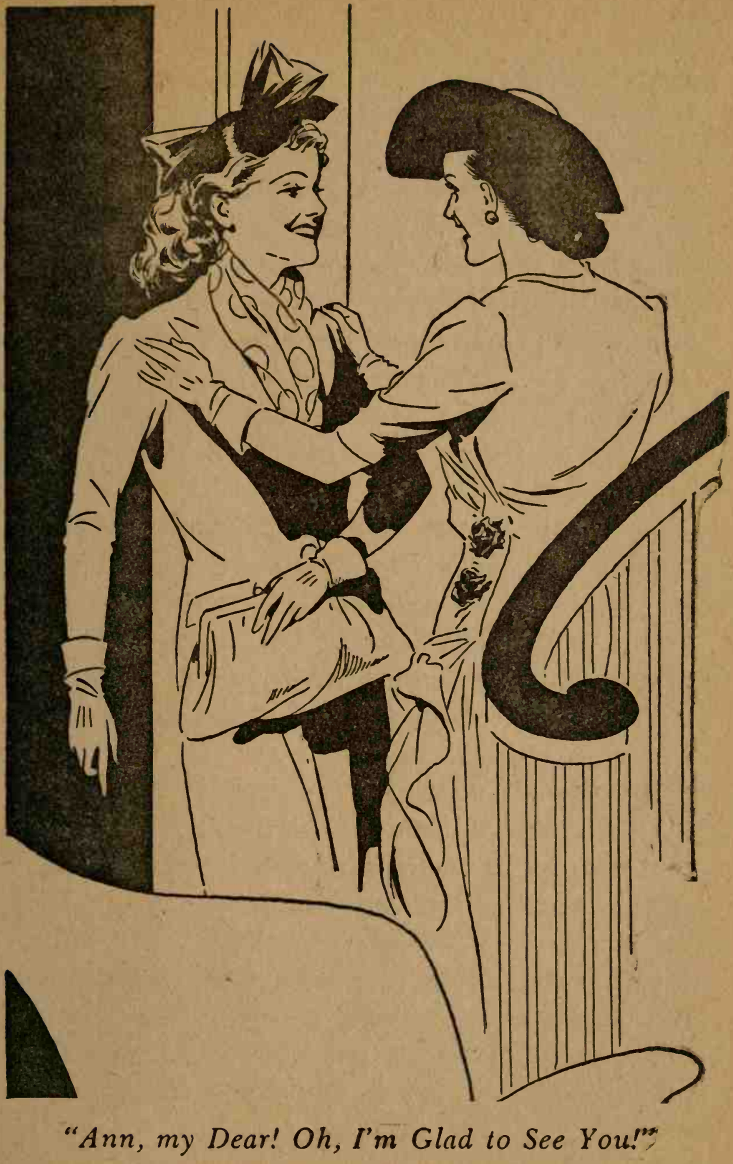
There was the softness of Tess's lips brushing against her cheek, then the woman held her back, away, to get a better picture of her.

"Little Ann!" she said. "Lovelier than ever. You've grown up, child!"

Ann said, "Child! Tess, after *all—!*"

"Grown up. Become famous. I have the last photo you sent up in my gallery. But it doesn't do you justice. Your pictures don't either—you're better in the flesh."

They were words of honest praise. Tess Whitehouse was an honest person. She believed that the kindly word, unspoken, was a sin. And yet, Ann sensed the undercurrent beneath the swift bright



"Ann, my Dear! Oh, I'm Glad to See You!"

flow. Tess's thoughts were ahead of her, and she was racing to catch up to them.

Ann heard herself murmuring something. It sounded childish in her own ears. But Tess seemed not to have heard. The girl with the green eyes had moved backward, away from them. She was concentrating her attention on a figurine which stood on a low table outside the alcove. With a wide gesture, Tess included her. "This is Jacky Dahl, Ann." The girl smiled. Tess said, "No doubt you recognized Ann, Jacky?"

"Oh, I did."

"You should have sent her right on up." Tess came in a rush back to Ann. "Jacky's been with me for three years. I raised her from a pup." There was a note of affection, deep-rooted, in the tone. And deep affection in the look the green-eyed girl gave back to Tess Whitehouse. And something more. Concern, it seemed to Ann.

But whatever had been the cause of Jacky Dahl's reluctance to have Ann and Tess meet, thought and conjecture upon the subject were engulfed in the glow of welcome that Ann now received.

Tess was talking swiftly.

"I can't tell you how glad I am that you've come, Ann—just now—at this time! I was wracking my brains, wondering what under the sun I'd do! And, presto!" Her hands spread. "Here you are!"

Ann managed to get in a word, asking, "Something I can do, Tess?"

"Something! I should say so!"

"Well—?"

Tess had taken Ann's free hand. She said, softly, "I was so relieved, I talked a bit too loudly, I'm afraid. Mrs. Henderson's up in the reception. And she has ears—!" Tess's wise nod said they were hearing ears. Her voice went even lower. "It's this way —every now and then I have a celebrity in. Just about every time anybody important is in town, all the girls come here."

Ann said appreciatively, "I can well believe it, Tess. The place is lovely."

"Wait till you see it," Tess said, and rushed on, "Lorna Patten's playing this week at the Two Rivers Theater. You know, her marvelous monologues."

"I know," Ann said.

"Well, there were a number of women I especially wanted to get a look at Lorna—in person—off the stage. Women who needed a boost, the kind of a boost only Lorna could give 'em. I let out what time her appointment here would be. So—there were fifteen permanents booked for this afternoon."

Tess paused, but Ann held her peace, waiting. The owner of the beauty shop glanced upward, and it seemed she was listening. There came only the murmur of low voices, indistinguishable. Tess's eyes came back to Ann's face. "Not that they wouldn't have come anyhow, my dear. They were all booked for this week. I wanted them to see Lorna, you understand?"

Ann nodded. She said quietly, "I understand, Tess." As though the woman had not heard, she went on, "Mrs. Henderson's the last to come in. Her husband's in Africa. There's little Alice Burgess—*her* husband won't come back. And so it is with all of them." Tess paused, bit her lower lip. Her eyes probed Ann's. "You get the idea?"

"I get it, Tess."

Tess took her hand away, folded the fingers tightly over her bag. "And Lorna wasn't able to appear last night. She cancelled her appointment for this afternoon. I don't know the whys—overwork, perhaps." A gleam came into the brown eyes. "So you see, my dear, where you come in!"

"Me?"

"You. You're my celebrity. You fill in the gap. You give them the boost they need."

"But—but, Tess!"

"Don't tell me you haven't the time!"

"It—it isn't the time. I'd take time to help out." Ann's throat felt thick. She swallowed suddenly. "After all—*Lorna Patten!*"

Tess's eyes went over the girl, swiftly, surely. She said, "Don't be silly!" Her hand was over Ann's fingers again, pressing them urgently. "Go on up, will you, honey? Gail's in the reception at the top of the stairs. You remember Gail De Lane?"

Ann remembered her, the tall, beautiful blonde woman who was Tess Whitehouse's other self. Hers was the mind of the careful executive. What Tess Whitehouse dreamed and envisioned, Gail De Lane carried through. They had been together for years.

"Well—" Tess rose, "that's settled!" She nodded to where Jacky Dahl was standing near the curved archway. "I think I left my coat in there," she said.

"Yes, you did, Miss Whitehouse." The green-eyed girl disappeared behind the drapery, as though she were grateful for an excuse to be away. Ann came to her feet. She said, haltingly, "But, Tess—won't you be here?"

Jacky came out, gave Tess the lavender cloth coat banded in ocelot. Tess, slipping her arms into the sleeves, said, "I'll be back."

Ann felt suddenly lost in bewilderment, confused and hurt, too. Tess might well be concerned when the afternoon she had so carefully planned had seemed headed for failure, but the way she was thrusting Ann in to fill the gap, rushing off and leaving her—it did not make sense. It was not like Tess. Not at all like the pleasant visit Ann had anticipated. Her thoughts must have been mirrored in her eyes, for Tess drew her close, took her toward the door.

"I'm all out of sorts, Ann," she said contritely. "The place is much better off without me just now. I'm going out and buy some earrings."

Ann knew of Tess's first-aid habit to overcome the doldrums. It was to buy a pair of earrings. She never wore them. She never paid a great deal for them. Usually she gave them away. But buying a pair of earrings seemed always to bolster up Tess's spirits.

Ann thought fleetingly, "Tess is going out to buy earrings to give herself a boost, and I'm to go up and give all those women a boost—and I came here for a little bit of cheerful first aid myself!"

But immediately her thought grew away from herself. "I'm being selfish! I really don't need any cheering up. I feel marvelous. I'm just a little disappointed because Tess is going out. Maybe she needs to get away—for a little while. If I'm a real friend, now's my chance to prove it—when she needs me."

Ann was smiling when she said, "Hurry back, won't you? In case they don't like your substitute?"

Tess squeezed her arm. "You're a darling child, and they'll *love* you! I'll be back in a little while—soon as the wind blows the cobwebs out of my hair."

She went then, through the door and out upon the street, and as Ann watched the bronze hat bend before the gale, she thought, "It shouldn't take long!" She turned and found Jacky Dahl looking at her fixedly. The green eyes fell away, too quickly. Ann paused an instant, came to a staunch decision and went over to the girl.

"Is Tess worried about anything?" she asked bluntly.

"Worried—?" the girl repeated, sparring for words.

Ann persisted. "Is she, Jacky?" The use of the girl's name came easily. In spite of the restraint that had hung in the entrance—still hung, for that matter, Ann liked her and trusted her. "Is she worried about something? You can tell me. I'm a special friend, really."

The girl seemed to thaw.

"I don't know, Miss Sheridan. I mean, I can't be certain. But I feel that—that something's wrong. I want to help her, and I don't know how. She's—she's been so good to me!" There was a mist over the green eyes and golden lashes came down, screening them.

Ann's hand patted her shoulder reassuringly. "Well, we'll find out—and see if we can't help. I'm sure there's a way."

"I'm so glad you came, Miss Sheridan."

"I'm glad I did, too. And call me Ann—won't you?"

"I will—Ann."

"That's better." Ann was smiling. She let her lips straighten, and looked upward. "Well—" squaring her shoulders with mock ferocity, she took a step toward the stairs. "Here comes the big disappointment," she said.

"You won't be a disappointment," Jacky Dahl said surely, and with these encouraging words ringing in her ears, Ann went up the blue steps.

CHAPTER TWO

SEPARATE WAYS

Perhaps it had been Mrs. Henderson's voice Tess Whitehouse had heard in the upper reception room, but as Ann came to the head of the stairs, she found no one in the gracious enclosure. The central piece of furniture was a low desk which stood in front of another large, foamy-curtained window. There were more chairs, two sofas, several small tables with quaint figures, many of them serving as flower pots. The rug underfoot was still the same dusty-blue as that on the steps. Ann's slippers sank into its depths while she drank in the restfulness of the place.

But her thoughts would not let her linger in appreciation. She had been given a task to perform. Her eyes went quickly to right and left, seeking Gail De Lane who could tell her how best to proceed.

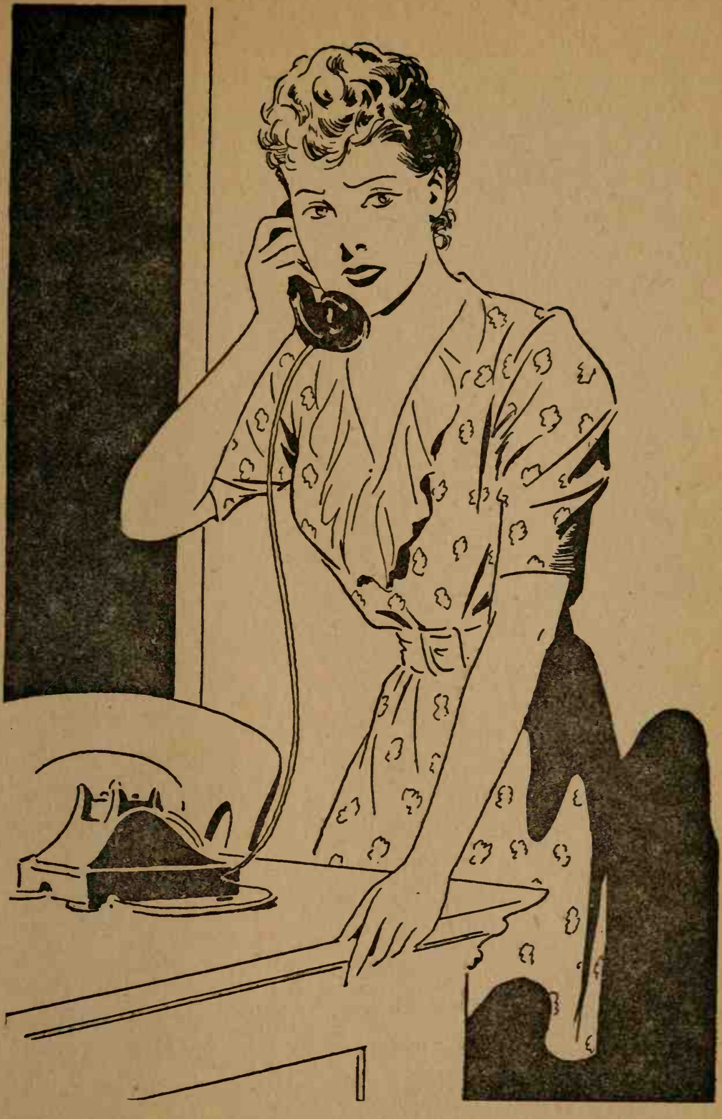
There was a narrow hallway to the right, a wide arch to the left. The arch framed a glimpse of a high desk, behind which several girls were seated, telephones before them. Moving nearer, Ann saw a portion of a room off from this place, a square room, filled with small tables and shelves which were rich with glassware, small statues, quaint boxes. A gift shop, Ann guessed, and recalled suddenly that she had heard Tess mention the gift shop in one of her broadcasts. Her "treasure hoard," she had called it. She had gathered articles for a shop, but made little effort to sell the things. She liked them so much herself.

Ann's eye went back to the high desk. The logical thing would be to inquire there, to ask any one of the three small queens who sat enthroned where she might find Gail De Lane.

But Ann turned her head suddenly to the right, away from the desk. She had heard Gail De Lane's voice, coming from the narrow hallway.

Ann was eager to see Gail De Lane. Almost as eager as she had been to see Tess. And now, since she had had her brief meeting with her friend in the entrance, since she had felt the unspoken weight that burdened Tess Whitehouse's slender shoulders, Ann was all the more desirous of having a talk with the executive half of the Whitehouse. If anyone knew what was troubling Tess, it would surely be Gail De Lane.

Over the blue carpet, Ann sped swiftly. Coming to the narrow hall, where walls and ceiling were an unusual blend of pink and rose shades, Ann saw that there were two rooms jutting from it. Both



"Ring Again, Operator! Keep on Ringing!"

doors were open. The room done in green and gold was empty. But in the blue room, Gail De Lane was standing with her back to the door. Her right hand was clasping the edge of a mauve-colored desk. In her left hand was the receiver of her telephone. Ann paused, waiting.

Gail De Lane said, in a hoarsely insistent voice, "Ring again, operator! Keep on ringing!"

Ann had recaptured some of her first delight at the sight of Gail, but again her joy was shaken, again she met with a gray veil of suspense, of unnameable tension. It was in the way the blonde woman was standing there at her desk, in the tight fingers gripping the wood. And it was in Gail De Lane's voice.

She said, as though abruptly accepting a disappointment, "All right. Thank you."

The receiver clicked down upon the instrument. Gail De Lane stood looking down at it while Ann remained rooted in the doorway, uncertain, unwilling to speak, yet wanting to make her presence known. She could see the woman's face now. The dark brows that went upward over slightly slanting eyes, the almost snubbed nose, the warm, small mouth. Gail wore her hair a new way, in a high pompadour, and it was vastly becoming, though it served to make her appear taller. She was even more slender than Ann had remembered. The dark blue dress with its frill of white lace at the throat might have accentuated her slimness, but Ann thought not. She thought, "Gail's worried, too! Oh, dear, what *is* the matter with everybody around here?"

The blonde woman turned suddenly, and gave a slight start at the sight of the girl in the doorway. Ann said, "Gail—I didn't mean to burst in on you—."

"Why—Ann!" As Tess's hands had come out to her, so did Gail's beautiful, tapered fingers. She clasped the girl's two arms, drew her into the room. "Ann Sheridan! Where did you drop from? I mean what part of heaven? You look like an angel!"

Ann laughed. "I just blew in," she said. "It's windy in your town."

"An ill wind that blew in a lot of good. You're a sight for cindered eyes."

"You're looking marvelous yourself," Ann said warmly, and her gaze went from the woman to the blue walls. "And your office is beautiful. You can hardly call it an office. I just love it all, Gail. The whole place is simply beautiful."

"It's a beautiful business," Gail De Lane quoted obediently, but there was a certain sincerity missing from her tone. Ann thought she detected a note of regret. Certainly something was missing from the gray eyes that looked into her own. It had not been the strict truth when Ann had said that Gail De Lane looked marvelous. She did not. She looked deeply concerned and she was trying hard not to show it.

Ann said swiftly, "I met Tess in the entrance downstairs. She sent me up here to you. Something about taking Lorna Patten's place."

"Oh, yes." Gail seemed to remember a previous trouble. The habit of graciousness fell about her like a cloak. "It's kind of you to pinch hit in her place. We were so disappointed. But you'll do, my dear."

"I hope so," Ann said. She saw Gail De Lane looking toward the telephone as though she wondered if she should put in another call. "If you're busy," Ann said hastily, "I'll go on out to the desk and try to be as useful as possible."

"Oh—no," Gail shook her head. "No. It's all right. I'll go with you." Her fingers pressed Ann's arm warmly. "I want to bask in the reflected glow," she confessed.

But Ann knew that Gail De Lane wanted nothing of the sort. She wanted to try again to reach the person she had tried to call before. But there had been no answer, and so Gail knew it would be useless to try again immediately. She was almost forcing herself to be pleasant, to think of her present duty to the waiting customers and to Ann, her substitute celebrity.

They came through the narrow hallway and to the desk before the large window.

Ann said, making conversation, "Tess went out to buy earrings, she said. But she promised to hurry back."

"I know." Gail was looking ahead toward the desk. Her face was calm, but Ann knew that her eyes went swiftly toward the girls who were seated there, that she saw in a quick glance that everything was running smoothly. Several ladies were coming up the blue steps. Gail spoke to them graciously. One looked curiously at Ann, but went with the others through the opening in front of the gift room.

Gail pointed it out. "That's our cherished nook," she said. "The things Tess and I hoard and hope not to sell. But every now and then a buyer gets insistent."

Ann laughed. "I thought you were a super-salesman, Gail."

"I thought so, too—once," Gail said, so soberly that Ann looked up, startled. She saw the small mouth held tightly, then Gail turned to the first girl at the desk.

"This is Ann Sheridan," she said, and all the girls were included. A little tremor passed over their lovely heads. Three pairs of eyes lifted brightly. Ann felt a glow of pleasure. Important people were no novelty here, but she was being made most welcome. She said something—she was not sure what it was—and then she was borne away on Gail De Lane's arm.

The manicure room was straight ahead, two rows of tables in pastel colors, each half hidden by delicate curtains running the full length of the room. Gail made another left turn and Ann found herself in the gallery, a wider hall, the walls of which were lined with autographed pictures of women and of men, too, whose names made history in the world of entertainment and of art.

"The rogues' gallery," Gail said, waving a hand widely. "It's grown since you've last seen it, pet."

"I should say so!" Ann said. "Just about *everybody's* here!"

"Just about." Gail pointed out the several long, curtained rooms which led from the gallery. "We'll make the rounds, now. There are several of the customers who've been waiting a long time to see Lorna. We'll get to them first." She looked directly at Ann and really smiled. "You all set?"

"I'm all set."

They went from one room to another. There was the place dedicated to facials. Ann had never seen more attractive booths. Each opened with a narrow door, curved at the top. At eye-level was an oval, grated window. Before you entered, you could look in, and each booth seemed prettier than the other. Merry cherubs danced over the mirrors, along the walls. Flowers and butterflies were painted with a generous profusion. Catching a glimpse of her own face in the mirror that ran the length of the permanent room, Ann seemed to be peering into a maze of springtime beauty. "You even painted the mirrors!" She said it breathlessly, and was doubtful that Gail De Lane heard her. For Gail was fully occupied being the busy hostess. "This is Ann Sheridan. Miss Patten was so sorry she was unable to come, but we don't mind so much, do we?—Now that we have Ann."

Ann went from room to room, spoke to one woman after another. Mrs. Henderson had finished with her first shampoo and seemed a little upset to have Ann find her in her dripping state.

Ann said, "You should see me when my hair is wet, Mrs. Henderson. I look like a beaver!"

Mrs. Henderson did not believe it, but she liked Ann. They all liked Ann. She could feel them liking her.

But when, at last, the rounds had been completed, when Gail led her back again to the blue nook that was her private office, Ann was grateful to sit down in one of the small, tufted chairs, to drink in the charming color and quiet of the little room. She saw now, what she had not fully observed before, the twin figures on gilded shelves on one wall, twisted little oriental figures, with merry faces and elaborate robes. There were more photographs here and there, not only dedicated to the Whitehouse, but signed with affection to Gail De Lane herself.

Ann sighed gratefully.

"This is a room to think in, Gail. No wonder you're such a success."

The blonde woman was still standing. Her face was toward the window, another glass framed in gauzy white. The light came in at her directly, and mercilessly it showed the bitter lines that gathered about her lips, drawing them sharply, disclosing the fact that Gail De Lane was no longer a girl. She said, not meeting Ann's eyes, "Oh, I'm the world's eighth wonder. I'm a wow! I think of everything—except the thing that's right in front of my nose!"

"Why—Gail!" Ann said helplessly, at a loss.

"Don't pay any attention to me." Her hand was on Ann's, pleading. "I'm an old crosspatch. But I've got things on my mind." She lifted the receiver. "Just a minute now, child. I have to call home."

Ann waited while she gave a number, and they both waited after that. The room was so still, Ann heard clearly the ringing sound, a sound which continued almost like a spoken plea, but which was not rewarded.

Gail said, numbly, "No answer," and hung up. "I'll have to run home." She had said it to herself, but she became aware of Ann, waiting and watching her. "I'll have to dash," she told the girl directly. "I—I'm worried—."

"What is it, Gail?" Ann tried to recall whether or not Gail had any immediate family. If her memory could be trusted, there was no one living with her, at least no relatives. Gail had a colored woman who had been with her for years. No one else. She had said several times in Ann's hearing that she was 'One of the shes who traveled fastest because she traveled alone.' Why, then, was Gail so upset about what was going on at her home?

"It's my sister, Lacey," Gail said.

"Oh. I didn't know you had a sister, Gail."

The woman's mouth twisted. "I haven't. That was one of my prayers that went unanswered. Lacey's really my sister-in-law. She's a widow. My brother died some years ago. Lacey and I kind of got together when we came to Coreyville, and she's been with me ever since." Gail's eyes seemed glued to the telephone. "I never say 'sister-in-law,'" she said, so softly Ann scarcely heard the words. "I always called her 'sister.' It's a name I fancy—a lot."

Gail was close enough for Ann to touch, but she seemed miles away. It was a simple little recital, and yet Ann had the feeling that Gail gave each word a leaden importance, that she was talking to an unseen audience in which Ann had no part.

The sun was lowering. A shaft of red tinted the frills of the white curtain. Ann realized suddenly that the time she had given herself for this visit was over. She should be leaving now.

With an effort, she told herself that it had been a nice visit, that she had enjoyed herself. She said to Gail, "I'm glad you have your sister with you. It must be grand. I hate to say it, but I'm afraid I'd better be running along—."

"Oh, no!" Gail was aware of her now. "You mustn't. Why, you haven't had a real talk with Tess. You haven't had dinner."

"I can eat on the train," Ann pointed out. "It leaves at six-fifteen."

"Wait till tomorrow—please. Couldn't you? It would mean so much to Tess, having you here—to-night."

"Well," Ann hesitated. "I did want a gab fest. But goodness only knows when Tess will be coming back." Ann looked sharply into the gray eyes above her own. Now was the time to ask Gail what was troubling Tess. She had meant to ask before, but it was evident that Gail had her worries, too. Ann felt uncertain. She did not want to intrude, but *these were her friends,* she told herself. If you found your friends in some difficulty, you did not simply stand by and wonder about it. You tried to find out what was wrong. You tried to help.

Perhaps Gail was searching for words of her own to make some explanation. There was a small awkward little silence between them.

Ann said suddenly, "Gail, can't you tell me?"

The woman turned away. Her eyes went across the narrow hallway, to the green and gold room. Ann could not see much of it, for the door was open only part way. But she knew that this must be Tess's sanctuary. Gail said, "I'll tell you." She faced Ann directly. "I handed in my resignation today."

"You handed in your resignation?" Ann repeated, her voice trailing along like a second violin slightly off key. "What do you mean, Gail?"

"Just that. I quit. I'm leaving the Whitehouse."

"You're leaving—! But—but Gail, you *can't* leave. You can't leave *Tess!*"

"I don't want to!" The words seemed wrung from Gail's twisting mouth. "But it isn't always what we want to do. I *have* to leave!" Her beautiful hands came up, covering her eyes. Ann heard her murmur, "Oh, I've been so blind—so selfish!"

"But, *why*, Gail?" Ann protested.

The woman made no answer, only moved her head miserably, as though the golden pompadour were as heavy as solid metal, too great a weight for the slender neck in the lacy collar.

Ann tried again. "You told *Tess* that you were leaving?"

"Yes. I told her today." The hands came down.

With an effort, Gail De Lane recovered a measure of her customary poise. "It's been a bad day for Tess. The disappointment over Lorna Patten, and then my—my news."

"I knew something was wrong."

"They all knew. Tess doesn't get deeply upset very often. But when she does, it's as though the lights go out. Blackout." Gail came nearer. "But your coming helped so much, Ann. You've handled the customers—and now, please don't let Tess down. Stay tonight—at least."

"All right," Ann said slowly. "All right, I will."

"That's our good girl." But Gail De Lane's eyes had drifted back again to the telephone. "I'll try again," she murmured and her hand reached out, but in that instant a quick step sounded in the hallway. Tess Whitehouse's voice came almost gaily heralding her approach.

"My dears, where are you?" She seemed to burst in upon them. "Oh, Ann!" This was in evident relief. "I was afraid you'd left me!"

"I'm still here!" Ann said staunchly.

The lavender coat slipped from Tess's shoulders. She tossed it over Gail's desk. Ann heard the small rustle of paper and saw the envelope, folded tightly over something small and lumpy. The earrings. Tess had bought her pair of earrings.

"Guess what?" Tess peeled off her gloves, added them to the coat. "I bumped into Lorna Patten."

"You did?" Ann said dutifully, because some reply seemed in order and Gail had moved away, behind the desk.

"I did. And she's coming here tonight for her appointment. No explanation at all. Simply said she was so sorry and she'd like you to give her the works, Gail."

"Me!" Gail put a world of meaning into the word. "But—but I told you, Tess!"

The two who had been together for so many years stood locked in a strange tension. Ann could feel it so strongly, it was almost as though a cold wind had broken through the barrier of the lovely window, had brought its knife-like chill like a hand of hateful vengeance, slashing at something warm and alive and once precious.

Tess said, "Couldn't you be here, just for tonight, Gail?"

"I—" the blonde woman bit her lip. Color came in a flood over her face which had been deathly pale. "Oh, you don't understand, Tess. You don't *know!* I have to go home!"

"But why, my dear? You were home for lunch. Everything was all right then, wasn't it?"

"No. No, it wasn't. Lacey wasn't there."

"She'd probably gone to do the marketing," Tess said, as one who pacifies the unreasonable fears of a small child. "Lacey goes out every day, doesn't she? There's nothing strange about that."

"You don't understand," Gail repeated stubbornly. "And she isn't home yet. I've tried and tried to reach her."

"Well, maybe she wasn't expecting you for dinner; you know what hectic hours we keep here some nights. Maybe she went to a movie. Maybe—"

Gail cut in like a whiplash. "She didn't go to a movie night before last, Tess. She was dead tired when she came home, as though she had walked miles. Her eyes were blank, I tell you—*blank!* It seemed—it seemed as though she didn't know me!"

Tess made an attempt at a light laugh. "Well, maybe you looked sort of done in yourself, pet. This business is wearing at times."

"It's no use, Tess." Gail shook her head. "I just have been too blind to see it. Lacey's ill. I have to get her away—I don't know where—but somewhere. Can't you understand? Lacey's—well, she's all the family I've got!"

"I understand," Tess's tone had grown soft. Tess, Ann reflected, had no family at all, except two gorgeous Persian cats. "I'm mighty fond of Lacey, too," Tess went on. "That's why I can't see it, Gail. Anybody in the world but Lacey!" She came to Gail's side. "Aren't you making mountains out of molehills, Gail? Aren't you?"

Gail shuddered. "I wish I were! But I know something's happened to change Lacey. She's—different."

The room was small. Ann had moved away from the two, almost pushing herself against the window. She felt miserable, an eavesdropper. Tess and Gail seemed unaware of her presence now, but they would remember that Ann had heard every word of this strange conversation. It would be awkward. What was being said was not for other ears, even the ears of a friend. "If I could only get into the reception room!" Ann thought, and her purse slipped from her fingers. It made a small thud on the floor. The eyes of both women turned as Ann bent to retrieve it. Ann's smile was apologetic. She moved her lips to murmur something, but the two were not listening to her. Tess said, "All right, Gail, if you feel that way—" and the air in the room seemed to move, lifting an invisible weight. It was on Tess's shoulders now, and Gail was trying to make amends.

"Believe me, Tess, it isn't all in my head. I found something this noon, something—" She broke off, moving back of her desk. The fingers of her right hand grasped a rounded knob, but she did not open the drawer at once. "If it hadn't been for Lacey's peculiar actions—but the way things are, I'm frantic, I tell you!"

Gail might be the business head of the Whitehouse, but now she appeared anything but the executive type, in Ann's opinion. It was Tess who came up on the practical side.

"Suppose you tell us about it?" she said, and Ann warmed. She was being included. Tess had not forgotten nor overlooked her presence, and neither had Gail. Both women were well aware she was a part of this twisted conference, and they seemed grateful for her being there.

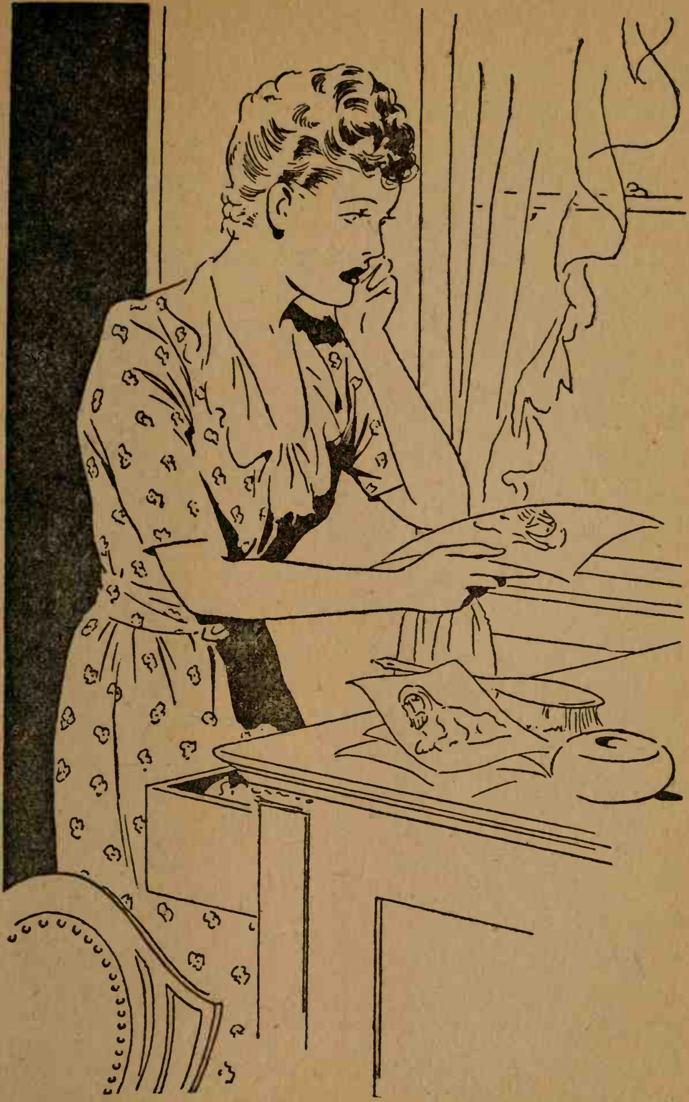
Gail said, "All right, I'll tell you. I picked up three pairs of hose this morning for Lacey. I—I like to bring her a little surprise every now and then. When she wasn't home, I went to her room. I meant to tuck the box in her dresser drawer." Gail paused, so long that Tess said, "Well, did you?"

"Yes, I did. Now, understand that I didn't mean to pry—or to make any discovery. That was as far from my mind as the stars!"

"Oh, *sakes*, Gail!" Tess sounded impatient. "We know that! Go on."

"Well—I found a large envelope. A legal size. I had mislaid our fire insurance policy and thought this might be it, that maybe Lacey had put it in her drawer, meaning to give it to me." Gail took a deep breath. "But it wasn't the policy. It was—it was a number of sheets of paper, all marked with a—with a sphinx."

"With a sphinx!" Ann was surprised to hear her own voice. The words seemed to have been drawn



"All Marked With a—With a Sphinx."

from her. Tess, too, shared the girl's astonishment.

"What under the sun—" she began.

Gail went on, "There was this—this sign—but a different message on each of the separate sheets. They were hand-printed."

Tess said, "What were the messages, Gail? Can you remember any of them?"

"I'll show you," Gail told them both. "They're different in a way, and yet—they say the same thing." Her hand was pulling at the drawer. Reaching in, she brought out her purse. "I was looking at these when you called me, Tess, asking me to hurry back. I was so confused, I jammed the whole bunch in my bag. And it's probably just as well. I—I'll feel better if you see them. Maybe—maybe you can convince me my mountains are m-molehills."

The warm mouth was trembling, Ann saw with a stab of pity, but her curiosity mounted, blotting out some of her concern for Gail. She bent forward, eager to see what Gail had to show them.

Tess took the envelope, her fingers reached inside, bringing out half a dozen folded papers. They were far from tidy—rather they had the appearance of having been held in a tightly clasped hand.

It seemed an endless minute before Tess pressed out two of the wrinkled sheets. Ann could not read the words in that first glance, but she clearly made out the figure at the top of each soiled paper. Drawn in red ink, roughly, as were the letters, was the image of the crouching, human-headed lioness. The eyes of the thing seemed to possess some sly secret, to bore into Ann's.

It was a sphinx, and yet it was not, in that this crude drawing bore none of the majesty of the Egyptian deity. This was a malicious masquerader, a travesty. It was only about two inches square, this sign, but Ann could not wholly repress a shudder. An unnameable fear took hold of her, a sense of impending danger.

She thought suddenly, "I don't blame Gail for worrying. I'd be worried, too!"

CHAPTER THREE

MYSTERIOUS INVITATIONS

From the space beyond the high desk, there came the mingling of voices. A laugh sounded, like a tinkling of silver. More laughter blended with it. The voices came nearer, grew in volume, and then dwindled as another group descended the blue stairs. More rested, more sure, these women were now ready to return to their various ways of life.

Ann was aware of their passing, with a sense of anger. What right had these women to be laughing like that, when Tess and Gail were in this blue room, so tense, so frightened?

Or was Tess frightened?

She was certainly very quiet, standing like a statue, reading the notes spread out before her. Gail stood behind her desk, watching Tess, never once moving.

She said, suddenly, in a choked voice, "Well—? What do you think, Tess?"

"I—" Tess began, and as though she wished to evade a direct answer, gave Ann the two sheets. "You read them," she said.

Ann was annoyed at herself for almost dropping one of the sheets. Despite her wish to be calm, her fingers were trembling. Through a blur, she saw the message printed on the first page. It was directly under the evil-eyed sphinx, six lines, that was all.

"The secret lies
In the deep pool,
The mystic pool.
Here is all beauty
All peace.
You are bidden."

The last line, "You are bidden," was penned in larger, bolder letters.

Ann took a quick breath, shifted the papers and read the second message.

"In the mystic pool,
In the deep, deep pool
The secret rests hidden.
Seek for beauty
Follow peace
You are bidden."

Tess seemed to know when Ann had finished reading. Her hands waited to take the papers. She said, "Well—?"

Ann realized with a sense of panic that both the women were looking at her fixedly, waiting for her opinion.

"Why, I—I don't know what to say," Ann faltered. "It's so—strange." She turned to Gail. "And as you said, they *are* a lot alike. Are the others all like that?"

"Practically the same."

Quick footsteps came to the hallway, and for a moment a girl in gray stood framed in the doorway. Tess turned to her and must have given some wordless message. The girl said, "Oh—," briefly, and went away. A moment later, her voice came, "Miss Whitehouse is in conference now. If you would wait, please?"

It was an interruption for which Ann was grateful. She had been spared answering Gail's question, she need not say what she thought.

Tess gave the papers back to Gail, who crammed them into her desk and shut the drawer.

"You don't have to say it," she said bitterly. "I can see it in your faces. You know it's the work of some secret organization. Somehow, they've got their hooks into Lacey. How, heaven only knows." She bit her lower lip to cover her emotion but her next words came out almost like a sob. "Oh, if I only knew where Lacey had gone!"

Tess was coming back to her more cheerful self—at least it seemed so. She said, "Maybe she's gone home. Why don't you try again, Gail?"

The blonde woman looked at the telephone, hesitated, then lifted the receiver.

It was the same as it had been before.

There was no answer.

"You see?" Gail said. "Now, will you believe me, Tess?"

Tess went around the desk and to Gail's side. "I still think you're stumbling over a shadow, my dear. Perhaps Lacey can give some reasonable and very ordinary explanation for those notes. Why, maybe she wrote them herself!"

"Wrote them herself!"

"Well," Tess shrugged, "some people do write the oddest poetry—or prose or whatever you'd call it. How d'you know Lacey didn't try her hand at that sort of thing?"

"Why—I know!" Gail said. "Nobody as sweet and good as Lacey could ever think up such rubbish as 'The deep, deep pool,' and 'The secret rests hidden.' And Lacey would never write, 'You are bidden.' That's an *invitation,* Tess. That's the way all the messages end!"

It was true, absolutely true. How could Tess argue Gail out of believing it? Or was Tess trying desperately to be kind?

Ann thought so. She thought Tess was as upset as she was herself. The crumpled paper, the blurred, red, human-headed lioness, the strange-sounding message—it was enough to give anyone a chill.

Tess tried again. "Maybe Lacey *found* them. Maybe they belong to someone else, Gail. Had you ever thought of that?"

"If they belonged to someone else, Lacey would have returned them to their rightful owner." Gail had spoken with a show of spirit, but it did not hold. "It's no use, Tess," she said heavily. "You know, and Ann knows, and I know there's something hateful about this. And remember, *this isn't the first time* Lacey's disappeared for hours. It's happened before. At first I thought as you did that she went to a show or visited some friends. But that last time, when she came home so late, when she looked like a walking ghost—!"

Gail buried her face in her hands.

"Oh, I've been blind, blind!"

Tess's hand moved to the bowed head, but she drew away. "I'll tell you what, Gail, you run home right now. You can see for yourself, then. Maybe Lacey's curled up on her bed, sound asleep. It *could* be she didn't hear the phone, you know. So—you run home, and come back as soon as you can."

"No. No, I can't, Tess." Gail had been looking at Tess with a kind of terror growing in her face. "I can't go. I—I'm afraid!"

"Why—Gail!"

"I am, and that's the unvarnished truth. I'm afraid to go into my own apartment."

"Well—" Tess glanced away, brought her dark eyes back so calmly that Ann felt a surge of admiration for her. "Well," she said again, "Ann and I'll have to go for you, I suppose." She turned to Ann, and the girl read the urgent appeal underneath the lightness of her tone. "You'll come, won't you, Ann?"

"Why—of course." Ann had been silent, and now her voice came out hoarsely. She coughed. "I—I'll be glad to, Tess."

"You see?" Tess spread her hands. "We'll dash in, tell Lacey to wake up and hear her telephone when it rings—and we'll call you." Tess Whitehouse was definitely a woman with a purpose. Her hands were lifting her pretty coat. Putting it on, she said briskly, "You'd better call Davidson's right away, Gail. Have some supper sent up."

Gail said vaguely, "Supper—?"

"And order something substantial. I'll bet you skipped lunch, with all this hubbub." The coat was on. Tess, motioning to Ann, moved toward the door. Ann had opened the jacket of her suit, but now, making ready to brave the cold wind again, her fingers moved swiftly over the buttons. She came to Tess's side as the woman turned for a last word. "Then you'll stay on tonight, won't you, Gail? You know—Lorna Patten? She'll be here soon."

Gail's eyes had been drawn again to the telephone. She looked up half guiltily. "Stay on—? Why—yes. Yes, if you call."

"I'll call. And don't worry, everything's going to be perfect!"

Tess flashed her glowing smile and Ann was grateful to see some response in Gail's face. She said, "Hurry, won't you?"

"We're practically there!" Tess told her, and took Ann's arm. They went out swiftly.

Tess paused a moment at the high desk, and after that the two of them went down the winding blue stairway. Looking back over her shoulder, Ann said, "Tess, it's lovely!"

"Thanks, pet," Tess said absently, and the little light that had burned in Ann's thoughts seemed choked out. The blackness had come again. For Ann had surprised a look of deep concern on her friend's face. Tess *was* worried. She had simply been trying to cheer Gail, but all the time she feared—!

What, Ann asked herself. Did Tess believe that the messages were the work of some secret organization? That the evil-eyed sphinx was the sign of some mysterious, underhanded group?

Ann's foot on the last step faltered. "Careful, honey," Tess said, and Ann said, "Clumsy of me."

But it was only her thoughts which were heavy, leaden. Invisible lights glowed in the entranceway now, making the glassware gleam with rainbow colors. The electric sign in front of the shop had come to life, too, the sampler shone first on one side, then on the other.

As they went out the door, Ann turned her eyes upward. The wind had died, but it had grown colder. Tess turned toward the nearest corner, where a music shop had a brilliant display of instruments in the window. "Come on, honey," she said. "My car's around here."

"Yes—." Ann looked away from the cross-stitch flowers, the beads of light that spelled TESS WHITEHOUSE.

Only such a short while ago she had come rushing into this place—so eager, so sure of a gay welcome!

There had been nothing lacking in the welcome, as far as that went. Tess and Gail had both greeted her with open arms. It was because of that, Ann told herself, that she felt so strangely out of key. Her friends were bogged down in something tangled, something menacing. What affected them touched her, too.

And Ann knew now for certain that Tess was viewing the business of Lacey's disappearance with anything but a light heart. More convincing than anything Tess might have said was her deep and thoughtful silence as she went to the little coupe parked around the corner, saw Ann in, and slid in behind the wheel.

They had driven several blocks when Tess said suddenly, "This is a nice how-de-do for you, Ann!"

"For me—?" Ann had not been thinking of herself.

"Some reception committee! You meet up with gloom so thick you could cut it!"

"Oh—" Ann began, but Tess talked on. "But once we get this thing ironed out, we'll make up for lost time. We'll have fun. Are your bags at the Cole?"

"Bag," Ann corrected. "It's at the station. I thought I'd be going again."

"Dismiss the thought." Tess stopped for a red light. "Unless it's something terrifically important?"

"I'm out doing my bit selling war bonds, entertaining at camps," Ann said. "I don't know how important it is—but I try hard."

"I'm a pig," Tess said complacently, "but I need you in my camp tonight."

They were moving on again, turning to a wider avenue.

"That is—" Tess added, "if possible."

"I can make it," Ann said, and Tess seemed to sigh gratefully. The small sound hung on the air, when Ann said suddenly, "What is she like, Tess?"

"Lacey?" Tess was thinking of her, too.

"Yes. What does she look like?"

"She looks like—like mother with a capital M. She's little and dark—and quick. Quick to want to help anybody that needs helping. It—it's hard to describe Lacey, Ann. I like her so much."

Ann said, meekly, "Oh."

"She's beautiful, I think," Tess went on, her eyes on the road ahead. "Not beautiful the way the finished products are that come into our shop." Her eyes came to Ann's eager face. "It's like—well, you know a fine cake can take a lot of fancy decorating. But all you want on a loaf of homemade, fresh bread is—butter. Lacey's—homemade bread. She's a knockout in a housedress."

"I see."

"Do you?" Tess was half smiling. "It sounds rather silly, even to me, but as I said, it's hard to describe someone you're very fond of. Lacey's hair is soft, only a few flecks of gray, and naturally curly. There's one curl at the base of her neck that I always yearn to twirl around my finger. And that, coming from one who's handled the hair I've handled—well—"

Tess seemed to choke, and Ann said quickly, "Tess, Gail's very fond of her, isn't she?"

"Very."

"So—it seems foolish to think that Lacey would run away."

"It's more than foolish. It's almost unbelievable. And yet—"

Tess left it there. Ann filled in the gap. And yet, it might be possible. There were those messages, the sign of the sphinx.

Tess said, "I'd like to know how that vile stuff came into Lacey's dresser!"

She brought the car to the curb before a low, square building.

"Here we are," she said. "Maybe we'll get some of the answers now."

Ann looked toward the place which Gail De Lane called her home. Her guess was that the apartments would be small but comfortable. Lights glowed on the two floors and in the little entrance, showing some of the cement steps that led up to the door. There was shrubbery on either side of the steps, bare of leaves and not too inviting.

Tess, with her uncanny ability of picking up Ann's thought, said, "Gail has been talking of buying a house. She should, too. Lacey'd be happier with a garden, a clothes-line of her own. Perhaps Gail will get around to it—after this."

She motioned to Ann to open the door. "Well—?"

Ann simply nodded and put out her hand. In that moment a quick cry from Tess drew the girl back. She said, "Tess! Tess, what's the matter?"

"My show!" Tess gasped. "Oh, heaven preserve us!"

"Your show—?"

"I'm on the air tonight. I should be at the station now. I forgot it, Ann. I—it seems incredible—

but I simply forgot all about it!"

"You were thinking of Gail—and Lacey—"

"And I'm still thinking of them. Oh, dear! *What'll I do?*"

"You'd better get to the station as quickly as you can, Tess. That radio show is *something!*"

Tess raged in a moment of indecision. "I'll have to!" she said. "But, Gail—! She'll be waiting for me to call."

Ann said quickly, "I could call her, couldn't I?"

"Why—why, yes. Of course you could! Oh, Ann, I knew your coming would bring me good luck! It always does!"

Ann murmured something, and turned to look again at the building. She was realizing with a startling jolt that to call Gail and tell her all was well meant first that she must go in and find Lacey. She turned to Tess. "I'll have to have a key, won't I?"

"A key," Tess said, coming to earth.

"Yes—in case Lacey doesn't answer, you know."

Tess said again, more flatly, "A key. I never thought of that. Well, just ask the caretaker. He has the basement apartment. You go around to the back, around that path, see?" Tess pointed to the left where the shrubbery followed a line of uneven, flat stones pressed into the earth. "You can't miss it."

There was an eagerness in her tone, as Ann could well understand. Tess must be on hand for her program.

Ann opened the door of the car. "Shall I wait here for you, Tess?"

"Y-es—no, better take a cab and come down to the radio station. It's in the Cole Hotel. I'll probably be on the air, so just wait."

"All right," Ann managed to smile. "Good luck."

"Same to you," Tess said brightly enough, and for one long moment the two looked into each other's eyes. Tess was the first to lower her gaze. Her hands were both on the wheel. "Oh, Ann," she said abruptly. "It'll probably be eight-ish before I'm all through. There's usually a bunch I have to talk to when I come off the air. Think you can hold out that long—before we eat?"

"Oh—of course."

"Okay, then." The little car roared impatiently. "I'll be seeing you."

The next moment Tess was gone, driving down the street. Ann saw the car turn the corner and disappear and only then did she turn and walk toward the embedded stones.

The ground was soggy under a light crust. Ann resolved to keep diligently to the stones. Her eyes were on them as she went around the side of the apartment building, but her thoughts raced on ahead. She would ask the caretaker for the key.

Would she dare to ask him to go up with her? To open the door for her?

He might think that was requesting too much service. For, if she explained that she was a friend of Gail's, that she had come to give Lacey a message, or see Lacey, the man would think it strange that she would not go alone.

And Ann knew that she must go alone. Gail would not want others to know if—if something were wrong.

Ann shook her head, dismissing the thought, forcing it away.

Nothing was wrong. Lacey might be there, or she might not be there. It would be one thing or the other. She would call Gail as soon as she knew, and after that she would call a cab. She would meet Tess and they would have dinner together. And then they would talk and talk in Tess's long, white living room. The Persian cats, Lit and Lotto, would be twining around, arching their gorgeous backs, filling the comfortable silences with their purrs of prosperous content.

Thinking of the cats helped Ann to look ahead of the immediate future, to see what the hours ahead would bring. She knew, even though these might not be the same two Persians Tess had had when she had last seen her, that they would still be called Lit and Lotto. That was Tess's recipe for success, "A little luck and a lot of hard work." So she always kept a Lit and a Lotto to remind her.

Ann had no trouble in getting the key. And, even if she had intended to ask the caretaker to let her in, she found it would have been out of the question. The man was ready at the moment to leave the building, and in a great hurry to do so.

"My boy's being married tonight," he explained proudly. "You go right on up, girlie. Give the key back to Miss Gail."

Ann said she would, and went again around the house to the front entrance. There was a stiff cardboard tied to the key. The number on it, she saw, was 3-4. The basement must be considered the first floor, Ann thought swiftly. Because there were only two floors to the building.

She went through the door. The steps led upward past a row of mailboxes sunk into the wall. Ann saw, under the number 3-4, *Miss Gail De Lane, Mrs. Lacey De Lane*. She thought, as she walked upward, "Lacey has the same name. She was married to Gail's brother. And Lacey must be her real name, not a nickname."

The stairs were thickly padded in a deep red. There was no one in this first long hallway, and all the doors were shut. It seemed that there were six doors on either side. Behind them, people were cooking or eating their evening meals. The scent of warm food was on the still air. It took Ann's thoughts ahead again, reminding her of the dinner she and Tess would have together.

She went up the second flight more speedily. It seemed, as she reached the top, that she heard a woman's voice, sharply. A door at the end of the hallway closed and silence came.

Ann hoped that it had not been Lacey's voice she had heard. But then, whom would Lacey be talking to? Ann guessed that she and Gail lived alone in the apartment, for Gail had not mentioned the colored woman. Studying the number on the first door to her left, Ann saw it was 3-1. The De Lane apartment would be across the hall, the second door to the right.

Ann hurried her footsteps, found that she had guessed correctly, and bent to insert the key. Her large bag was tucked under her left arm, and as she leaned forward, it slipped to the floor. Ann gave a start, far out of proportion to the slight sound. All the doubt she had felt before came in a flood. Her hands seemed to turn to ice. She felt frozen from head to foot.

"What's the matter with me?" she asked herself. "I'm acting like a thief!" And the answer came from her own troubled thoughts. "Aren't you? Why don't you knock first? Maybe Lacey *is* home!"

Deep down in her heart, Ann did not believe that

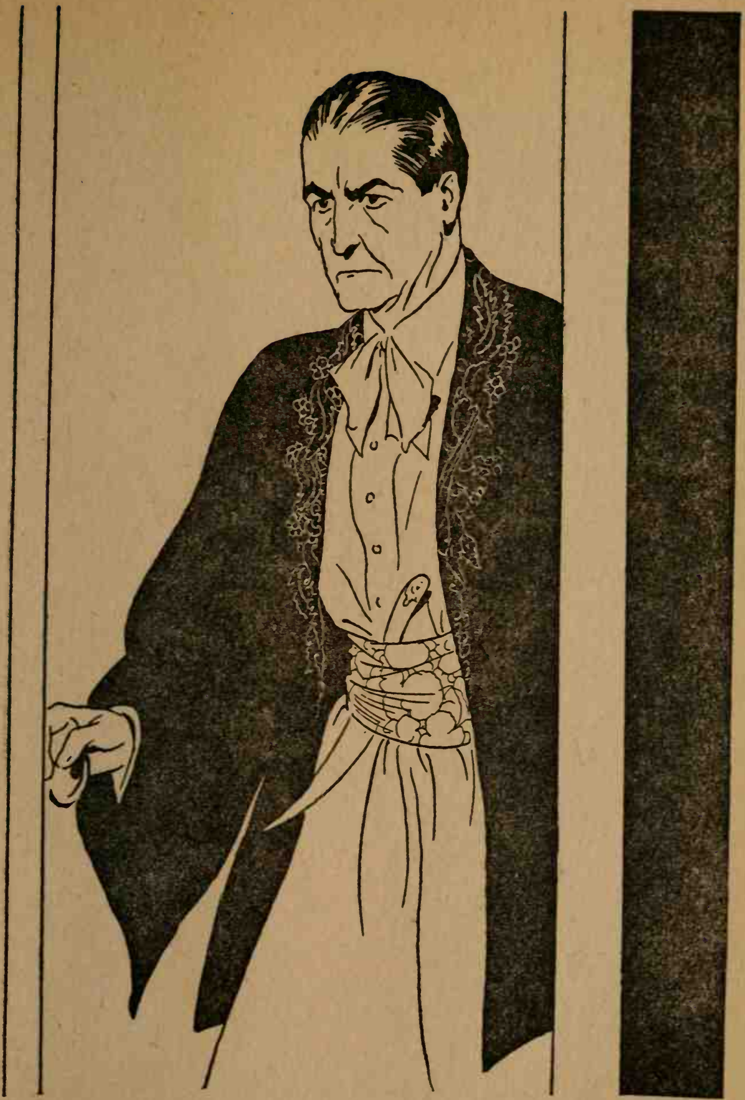
Lacey was home. She did not believe that the woman was sleeping. But it would be the courteous thing to knock first and make sure.

Ann would not admit to herself that she was caught in a sickening wave of terror. Rather, she tried to force herself to reason clearly, to believe that she was doing nothing unusual, nothing frightening.

There were three apartments on either side of the hallway. The door of the last apartment on this same side had just closed. So there was somebody there. There were people all about her, and nothing was strange or vague about them. They were ordinary everyday people, cooking their evening meals.

That was what Ann told herself as she gripped the key in her right hand. Her bag was pressed tightly against her left side. She could feel the beat of her heart against it. Her mind might argue that all was well, but her heart was pounding hard and fast in a wild contradiction.

"Gail was afraid to go in!" Ann remembered, and her uplifted hand paused. "But Tess wasn't afraid to come here! Tess meant to come in. She would have, too, if it hadn't been for her program." Ann well knew what that program meant, not only to Tess but to many others who were involved. "But Tess would never let me come here alone if she were afraid I'd be harmed in any way—program or no



An Immensely Tall Man Stood in the Doorway program!"

Ann's knuckles came against the door before her. It was a timid knock at best, but it brought results. Not as Ann had expected, but she was given ample proof that people were about her behind the other doors that lined the hallway.

She heard a door open from across the hall. Almost in the same instant, a man's voice said, "You wanted Miss De Lane?"

It seemed the voice had said, "Miss" De Lane, but it might have been a slurred "Mrs." Ann did not think in that instant. She whirled about to see an immensely tall man standing in the doorway directly across from the De Lane apartment.

Ann said eagerly, breathlessly, "Yes. Yes, I do!"

The man had not come out into the hall. He was standing back a little. Ann could not see his face well, but she saw his hand motion inward toward the room behind him. The gesture said, "Come in here, then. Right this way."

Ann's feet carried her across the hallway. "She's here?"

The man said nothing, only motioned again for Ann to come inside. She did so, acting on the spur of the moment, moving past the man at the door and coming into a square room, a living room, furnished with leather pieces too large, but comfortable looking.

Why she had obeyed so promptly, why she was here now and not out in the hallway, rapping at the De Lane door, was that she had believed his unspoken word. She believed that Lacey was in this apartment, or that the tall man knew where she had gone.

Or perhaps it was that he was simply flesh and blood, not some haunting ghost that stalked through her sense of terror. The man was one of "the people" who lived in this building. Ann had conjured up a pleasant picture of them, but now, as the door closed and as the man stood with his back against it, Ann's feeling underwent a remarkable and terrifying change.

Through her head, like lightning, came the realization that she had acted on impulse, without caution. That she had made a horrible mistake in coming here.

She saw now that the man's face was a deep reddish tan. Black hair grew back from a high forehead. He was facing the light from a wall lamp, and his cheek bones seemed to jut out in a sunken face. His eyes were snapping black and mercilessly intent.

Ann pulled her gaze from those eyes and in a brief moment studied the unusual clothing, the long-sleeved, black embroidered coat that hung loosely, the baggy dark trousers, gathered tight at the ankles. Around the man's waist was a wide, red sash. Tucked in the sash was a curved knife, sharp and shining.

Without knowing it, Ann's hand that held the key came up to her mouth. She felt her heart mounting in her throat, almost exploding with her terror. She heard a strange, strangled cry and knew it was her own voice.

With a leap like a panther's, the man was at her side. Fingers of steel closed over her mouth.

Wings seemed to beat over her head, faster, faster, the whirl of sound growing so that all thought, all fear was drowned out.

Ann's eyes closed and she felt herself falling, deeper and deeper, into a black pit of forgetfulness.

CHAPTER FOUR

UNUSUAL COSTUME

When Ann opened her eyes, she found that she was lying on a broad, leather couch. A pillow was under her head, propping it up, so that her eyes could take in the square room. Almost above her was the wall lamp. Its half-shade of dull orange cast a none too convincing light, but tentatively, Ann's eyes moved over the dark outline of a table, a deep chair. Then, in another chair, about five feet away, she saw the tall man. His head was bent. Ann thought, numbly but still a little amazed, "Why, he's almost bald!" Lifting her head a trifle, she saw that the man was rubbing his hands over his left ankle. She thought she heard him muttering something, but could not distinguish what he said. On a low table at his side was the knife, and at the sight of it Ann quickly closed her eyes.

But she was awake now, wide awake.

Her last conscious thought had been of self-reproach. She had acted foolishly, rushed blindly into danger. Now, as though the scattered bits of a puzzle had taken on a magnetic quality, the pieces were putting themselves swiftly together again. She was fully, clearly aware of the rash thing she had done. But she held herself still, pretending unconsciousness, while her thoughts, like a runner, raced ahead.

Who was this man? Why had he asked her to come into this room? Why had he said that Lacey was here?

But he had said nothing of the sort! Forcing her eyes to remain closed, fighting to gain time, fighting through the gray maze of terror that enmeshed her, Ann told herself ruthlessly that the man had simply asked if she were looking for Lacey. Then he had motioned her to come in.

"And like a little fool, I came in!" ran Ann's thought wildly. *"And now what?"*

Now she must go, of course. She must get away, get back to the De Lane apartment.

Her thoughts turned in another channel. There was Gail, Gail who was at the shop now, waiting for her call. And Tess. She would be on the air soon, and then she would be waiting.

"They both know I'm here," Ann told herself, and drew immeasurable comfort from the thought. "If I don't show up before too long, they'll come, they'll find me."

The caretaker knew she was here, too. It might be some time before he would be coming back from his son's wedding, but even so, he knew she had come into the building.

The wild plunging of her heart abated somewhat. The fingers of her left hand moved a little at her side and Ann felt the cold leather of the couch, but she felt her purse, too. That seemed to add to her feeling of hopefulness. The man was no thief at any rate.

But what was he? Who was he? Why was he wearing such strange clothing? Was it some sort of a costume?

And then, like the jab of a sharp needle, came the thought, "What if he is a member of that same mysterious group that sent Lacey the red-inked invitations?"

"He couldn't be!" Ann said hotly to herself. "Not and live right here, right across the hall from her! What would be the sense of it?"

What was the sense of any of it!

From out of the shadows the man seemed to emerge like an evil genie, and Ann forgot her resolution to remain motionless. As he rose from his chair, she almost leaped to a sitting position.

The man said, "Don't start yelling again. Keep quiet."

Ann nodded. Her lips moved, but only a whisper came, so softly he could not have heard as she said, "I'll be quiet."

His feet were moving across the floor, over a green figured rug. Ann's eyes were drawn to them. She saw the embroidered slippers, curving upward at the toe. She saw, too, that the tall man favored the left foot. He was limping slightly.

So, even though he had made that one animal-like leap, he was in pain, he was hurt some way. Perhaps because he had leaped like that to almost choke the words from her lips.

Like a drowning person who grasps at a straw, Ann clutched and held that fact in her mind. The man could not run. He would not be able to give chase *if she should be lucky enough to get out the door.*

And in the next moment, Ann knew what course she would follow. She would pretend to consider the tall man as she had first thought of him, one of the people who lived in this building, one of the friendly, ordinary people. She would mask her fear. Be as matter-of-fact as possible—but she would keep her eyes on the door. And the first chance she had—.

The tall man came nearer, drew a chair closer to the couch. But he did not seat himself at once. A frown cut through the dark forehead.

"Want a drink of water?" he asked.

"Yes," Ann said eagerly, too eagerly. "Yes—if you please."

The man smiled. There was a table at the head of the couch. a table that had been out of Ann's line of vision. The man did not leave the room as Ann had hoped; he simply reached over to the table and took the glass of water which was there in readiness. Ice tinkled in the glass as he handed it to Ann, and a kind of icy glee danced in his eyes.

Ann said, weakly, "Oh. Oh, thank you."

She looked down into the clear depths, wanting the cool liquid, and yet hesitating, fearful.

The tall man's face was directly in the light of the orange lamp. His mouth, a red gash, drew upward. He said, "You don't need to be afraid. It's not poisoned."

It was as though he were daring her. Ann felt stiff, sitting there, her heels tight together, the glass in her hand. She said, "I'm not afraid. Why should I be?"

Lifting the glass, she drank the water slowly, keeping her eyes down.

"That was delicious," she said, and handed the glass back.

Somehow, she felt she had gained a victory. It seemed the black eyes lost some of their impish merriment. Almost gravely, the tall man took the empty glass and placed it back on the table. Ann leaned a little against the unyielding back of the couch, resolving to carry on her pretense of a pleasant, social call. A call made at the wrong door. A small mistake, but one easily remedied. All she needed to do, she told herself, was to act natural, to be quiet and cool.

She said, as the man seated himself near by, "I misunderstood you. I thought you—implied that Lacey De Lane was over here."

"You didn't misunderstand me." The man folded his arms. "That was exactly what I wished to imply."

Ann said, "Oh."

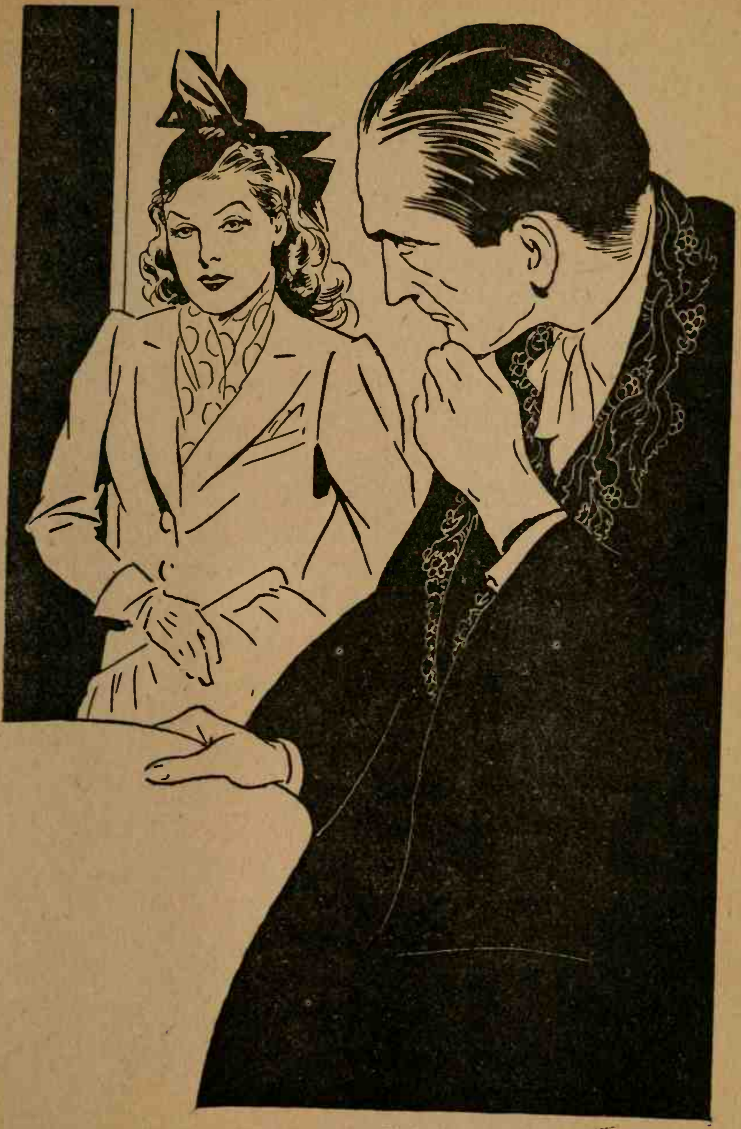
The last thing she wanted to do was to let her eyes travel across the room to that other table, the table which held the sharp knife. But against her will, she seemed forced to look at the thing, and from it she looked again at the tall man, at his darkly shining face, at the embroidered coat, the sandaled feet.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "What right had you to ask me to come here?"

"I didn't ask you to come."

"You did! Not in so many words, but you gave me the impression that Lacey was here!" Ann was on her feet now, and the tall man had risen, too. Ann's head lifted looking up into his face, inches above her own head. "What I want to say to Lacey De Lane is—important. I—."

"What you want to say to Lacey De Lane?" the man repeated after her, heavily, and yet every word was a barbed question mark. "Are you sure she's home?"



Valiantly She Tried to Explain

"Of course I'm not sure. I—I hoped she was."

"And in case she wasn't—you had a key ready."

Ann felt a flush rise in her cheeks.

"The caretaker gave me the key. I'm a friend of Lacey's."

"You are?"

He was so immensely tall. Ann felt dwarfed, childish. She was like a little girl being wrongfully punished, given no opportunity to make an explanation. But valiantly she tried to explain.

"Well, maybe I'm not a friend of Lacey's—but I know Gail very well. I've known her for years. And I've known Tess Whitehouse for—for—well, for almost as long as I can remember. Hearing them talk about Lacey, I feel I know her, too. Now—" Ann's head went up smartly, "are you satisfied?"

"Yes," the tall man said. "And no."

"It doesn't matter whether you are or not. This is really none of your affair." Ann took a deep breath. "Now, if you'll please open the door, I'll go about my business."

The man nodded. "In good time," he said. "When I'm really sure—."

"Sure of what?" Ann persisted, her voice rising. "Do I look like a sneak thief?"

"Take it easy." One of the large, dark hands lifted, cautioning quiet. "I might look like the big bad wolf, but I never eat little girls."

It was not a beautiful speech, but some of the ice around Ann's heart melted. She felt suddenly less afraid. And as the tension lessened for her, the sense of her duty to Gail De Lane mounted. She was wasting time, precious minutes. Gail was waiting in the shop, trying to carry on her work, taking care of Lorna Patten, while she must be almost frantic with worry.

Ann went to the man, took hold of one of his long arms. It was like taking hold of a stick of wood.

But Ann was not thinking of herself now; she thought of Gail De Lane.

"I've got to get into that apartment—right away!" she begged him. "You don't know how important it is. I've got to see if—."

"If what?"

"If Lacey's all right. Gail is worried. She's worried sick. She thinks something's happened to Lacey."

The black eyes narrowed. "She does?"

"Yes. And Gail couldn't come herself. She's got an important customer at the shop. And Tess is on the air tonight."

"That's right," the man nodded. "She is."

"So—*please* let me go over there and see if Lacey's in. I promised Gail I'd find out and call her right away."

The man's head moved toward the door, back to

Ann's face. She saw that he was frowning again, and her fingers tugged at the full sleeve of his embroidered coat. "You must know Gail and Lacey. You must know what wonderful people they are! You—you wouldn't want anything to happen to—to them, would you?"

For a long minute, the black eyes seemed to bore into Ann's face. Not directly at her, it was as though he looked through her.

"Lacey isn't home now," he said.

"She isn't home?" Ann had expected that Lacey had gone, but to have this man telling her so in such a sure, flat tone, was somehow startling. "Do you know when she left? Or have you any idea where she went?"

Ann was thinking, "Why, of course he might know. He's a strange-looking person, but somehow I'm sure he's a friend of the De Lanes."

The tall man was still silent, and Ann said again, "Oh, please, if you know anything about where Lacey might be, won't you tell me?"

"I wish I could tell you." He was looking straight into her eyes. And in that moment, Ann knew they had reached bedrock. There was nothing hazy or fearful now. This was firm footing. "I wish I could tell you where Lacey went," the man said again. "And I want to apologize to you, Miss Sheridan." He smiled briefly. "You *are* Ann Sheridan, aren't you?"

"Yes. Yes, I am. But—haven't you any idea—?"

"Nothing very helpful. Nothing at all, really. Except that I share your fear for Lacey. I'm worried about her, too. That was why I invited you over here."

"Why you invited me over here?" Ann said in bewilderment.

The tall man ran a hand over his forehead, backward to the black thatch of hair. He said suddenly, "Suppose we sit down, Ann, and talk this over. My ankle's burning up."

"But—Gail's waiting—," Ann began.

"Well, she'll have to wait, I'm afraid. It might be just as kind to let her hope for a few moments longer. I think we should have this little talk. It might be—helpful."

"All right." Ann sat again on the leather couch. The tall man returned to his chair.

The girl was looking at him intently as she waited for him to speak, but her fear had given way to puzzlement. Ann wondered who the man might be, why he was dressed so strangely—for an apartment dweller. He was like a character in some East Indian play. But Ann knew now that the man himself could be trusted. She was certain he was a friend, not a foe. When she spoke, it was quietly.

"Who are you, mister?"

"Me—?" The tall man came to earth. "I'm Rof Hunt."

"Rof Hunt—," Ann said, searching her memory. "Oh, I know! You dance!"

"Danced. Until I broke my ankle. It's almost okay, but it gives me a twinge now and then."

"That's too bad." Ann's eye went down to the favored foot. She understood the slippers now, and the baggy trousers and the embroidered coat. She knew, too, that it was not only the orange light that gave the glint to Rof Hunt's face. It was grease paint.

"I had this costume made just before I cracked," the man said, fingering one of the sleeves. "I put it on to get the effect."

"It's—perfect," Ann approved, and the man grinned.

"Must have given you a start, though."

"Well—yes, in a way," Ann admitted. "You don't expect to find that sort of thing—here."

"I'll say not. And I'd better get it off before Crunch comes back. That's my nephew—better known as Charles Boyden. This is his place. I've been visiting him while my old bones got well. Crunch is almost like a son to me."

"Oh," Ann said, "that's nice."

But she was wishing Rof Hunt would tell her what he knew of Lacey—why he was worried, too.

"Crunch," Rof Hunt went on, "has never understood me. My dancing, I mean. Not many people do. I started out to be a lawyer. When Crunch leaves, —maybe I'll go back to it again. The kid'd like it better."

Ann said again, "Oh." But her impatience shone through. Rof Hunt leaned forward on his chair, folded his large hands on his knees.

"Now—about you. I want to tell you why I invited you over here."

Ann said, breathlessly, "Why—?"

"Because I thought you were someone else at first. This morning, a girl with reddish hair called on Lacey."

"Oh—?" Ann prodded, while she wondered why that simple coincidence could have warranted Rof Hunt's suspicion of her.

"The girl didn't stay long," the man went on. "Only about ten minutes. The reason I know this is I was ready to run over to see Lacey when this girl came. Lacey said she'd be baking apple pie this morning and she usually puts one in for us, too."

"I see."

"So I was all set—and waiting. I saw the girl come in—and I saw her go out. When the coast was clear, I went over, hoping to get my pie."

"And did you?"

"No," Rof Hunt shook his head. "All I got was a shock."

"What do you mean?"

"Lacey seemed hardly to recognize me!"

"You mean—?"

"I mean just that. She looked like a woman in a daze. I asked about my pie and she muttered something. Her face was white as chalk and her eyes, they're usually bright as a robin's—well, the only word I can think of is—dead."

Ann felt a chill creeping over her. It was quite warm in the room, but she shivered.

One of Rof Hunt's hands came up, a finger pointing for emphasis. "It was because of that girl, Ann. She was only there ten minutes, but that was long enough to create that—difference. I know, because I heard Lacey going to the incinerator a while before. She was whistling. She can't sing, but she whistles like a lark. So—it was the girl."

Ann felt as though she were caught up in some baleful dream. She said, "But what could she have done?" And even as she said the words, it seemed she knew the answer.

The girl could have brought another message, another invitation bearing the Sign of the Sphinx!

Rof Hunt could not know of those invitations. Lacey had not told Gail, so it would be most unlikely that she would confide in anyone else. But Ann knew. And the knowledge was like a leaden weight.

She heard Rof Hunt saying, "I got only a glimpse of the girl—I wish I'd looked closer. But I didn't. After I saw how dazed Lacey was, I put two and two together. Then it was too late. But that explains about you, Ann. I thought at first you might be she. When I knew you weren't, I thought it might be another girl coming to bring more trouble. You see—*this isn't the first time.*"

Ann nodded dully. Gail had said that, too. This was not the first time. It had happened before. Not the girl's coming. Gail probably knew nothing of that. But Gail had seen Lacey in that self-same sleepwalking state. When she had appeared not to know her own sister.

Sister-in-law, Ann's thought contradicted and she squelched the useless bit. What was the difference? Lacey was like a sister to Gail. Gail knew her as well as one woman could know another. And loved her. There could be no doubt but that something secretive and hateful was happening here, in this very building, across the hall that lay outside Rof Hunt's door.

Ann said, "Lacey's gone now."

"Yes. She went out—not long after the girl left." There was a little pool of silence between them. The man went on, "Get this straight, Ann. I'm not the type that goes barging into other people's business. But I happen to like the De Lanes. I've been around here for several weeks now, hobbling around —and I got pretty well acquainted. With Lacey mostly, of course. Gail spends a lot of time at that beauty shop."

"She's been with Tess for ages," Ann said. "She's almost half the business."

"I know. Well—you came here because Gail was worried, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Now—if you want to tell me *why* Gail was worried, maybe we could do a little figuring on this thing. Find out what's up."

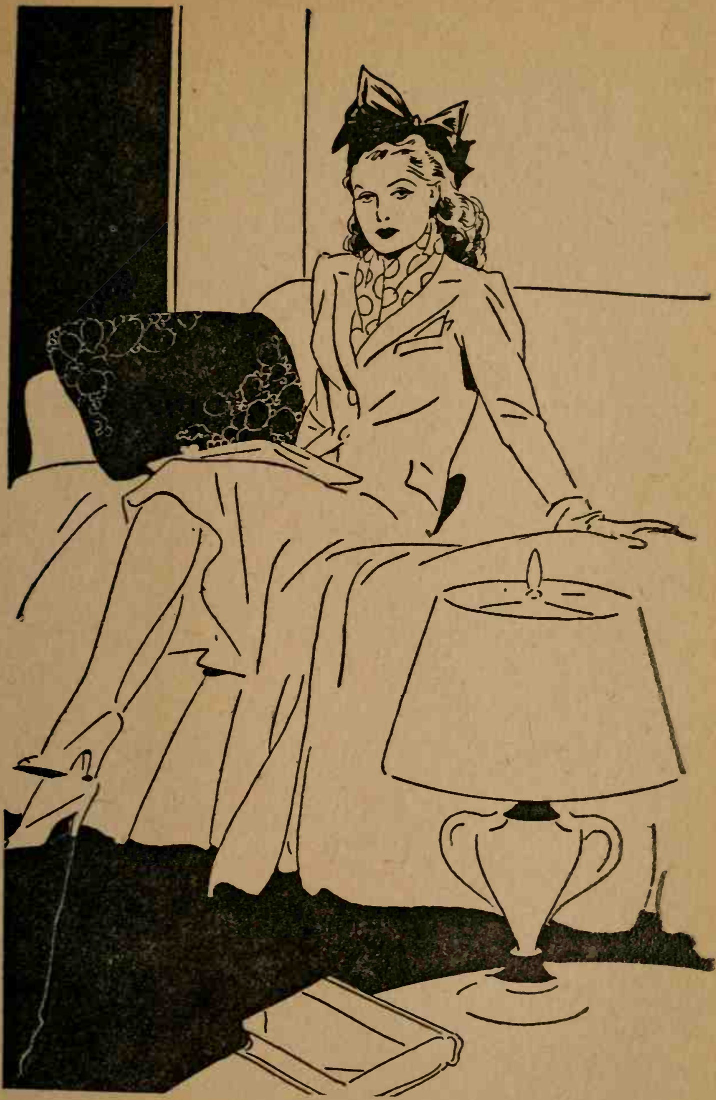
Ann drew a deep breath. She wanted to tell Rof Hunt about the Sign of the Sphinx, about the mysterious invitations, and yet she was sworn to an unspoken secrecy. This was not her affair. She had stumbled into the lives and cares of others, of friends.

But Rof Hunt was another friend. Perhaps he could help. Two heads would be better than one.

And all this time Gail was waiting, waiting for Ann to call her.

Ann rose with a swift gesture. "I don't know what to say!" she cried. "Oh, I don't know. I should call Gail—I've got to call her. And I hate to do it!"

She had not heard the door open, but it seemed Rof Hunt had caught the sound. He was turning to



She Wanted to Tell, but Was Sworn to Secrecy nod to the young man who stood in the doorway, his dark head on one side, watching the two of them with something like amusement.

Rof Hunt said, "Oh—Crunch."

The young man said, "Hello," and in the simple word was such richness and depth of tone that Ann thought swiftly, "He sings."

Crunch came toward them, and even across the square room it was a long stride. He was a long-legged fellow, not as tall as Rof Hunt, but with substantial shoulders in a rusty tweed suit. His shirt was green. Crunch wore no grease paint, but his skin was a warm brown. That was the way Ann sized him up briefly, "warm brown." His eyes were rather narrow, with slanting brows, heavy brows. His nose was just another nice straight nose, but his mouth was noticeable in that it was large, with long lips that went upward at the corners. Crunch Boyden was not a handsome man, but he was thoroughly likeable.

Crunch tossed his hat and coat to the table that held the knife, covering it. He said, idly, "Company?"

"Miss Sheridan," Rof Hunt told him, in a mildly reproving tone. And Ann, despite the worried state of affairs, fought to restrain a smile. Not so many minutes ago, the tall man had seemed like a creature from some haunting unreal world. Now he was telling Crunch to mind his manners!

"Miss Ann Sheridan," Rof Hunt said again, in the little silence that had fallen.

"I got it the first time," Crunch said. His hand went to the wall, turning on a light switch. The room was flooded in brilliance. Crunch went over to Ann.

She put out her hand and he took it, a firm cool grip.

"It's recompense," Crunch said gravely. "Retributive justice. For having a prancing uncle." He grinned at Rof Hunt, taking in his costume. "Miss Sheridan's another type of professional, but I notice she keeps the costumes on stage—not for street wear."

Rof Hunt said quietly, "I had hoped to have it off before you got here, Crunch. But we've been busy."

Crunch looked quickly from one to the other, sensing the seriousness in the air. "Trouble—?" he said.

"It's about the De Lanes," Rof Hunt said. "Ann's a friend of theirs. She came here to check on Lacey for Gail—and Lacey's gone."

"I know," Crunch said. "I saw her going out as I came in."

Ann was not certain if she spoke, or if it were Rof Hunt who said, "You—*what?*" But Crunch repeated, "Why, yes. Lacey went out just as I came in here."

In the blankness that followed, when Rof Hunt and Ann stared at him, Crunch said, "I'm sure it was Lacey. She had on that navy coat with the skinny fur collar and that dress with the white dots. I'm sure I saw the dots. Her hat was down a little over her face—."

Rof Hunt said, "Did she speak to you, Crunch?"

"No, come to think of it, she didn't. She acted as though she didn't see me or hear me when I spoke to her."

"But you're sure—?" Ann put in. "You're sure it was Lacey De Lane?"

"We-ll, I wouldn't like to take an oath on it." Crunch seemed to think too much importance was being attached to the matter. "But I think it was she."

Ann turned to Rof Hunt.

She said, miserably, "While we were talking here, she came back! She came back—and we missed her!"

Crunch frowned. "Just what is this?" he inquired.

Ann brushed away his question. "Crunch, do you know which way she went?" It did not seem strange that she was calling a man she had known for a few minutes by his nickname. It seemed rather that Ann had met these same men in this selfsame situation at some previous time. That was impossible, of course. Nothing quite like this had ever happened to her before. But there was no need for social preliminaries. There was no time. Time was precious. Ann persisted, "Did she take a cab? Or was she walking?"

"I don't know," Crunch said, sorry to be of little help. "I—well, I didn't think much about it. Nothing unusual, you know."

"Oh, but it is!" Ann cried. "Which way did she go?"

She was moving toward the door. Crunch went with her.

"I think it's too late now," he said. "But we can dash out there and look around if you want to."

"Oh, yes!" Ann cried. "And hurry, will you?"

Crunch said, "I'm hurrying," and his long legs sped down the hallway. Directly behind him Ann came flying.

"It couldn't happen like that!" she told herself. "I couldn't be here, right across the hall—and have her come in and leave again. I've got to find her. I've got to!"

But even as they raced down the stairs, astonishing some of the little group who met them coming up, Ann knew that her tapping heels were running a losing race. She knew that she and Crunch would be, by several maddening minutes, too late!

CHAPTER FIVE

ANOTHER ERRAND

When Crunch said, "She's nowhere around!" Ann voiced none of her disappointment. She had known it would be so. Lacey De Lane had disappeared, had been swallowed up in the darkness and the chill of the night.

But still she stood, hesitant, on the walk outside the apartment building. Could it be, might it be, that luck would favor her, and that Lacey De Lane might return? Several people were coming toward them. A man and two women. They were talking eagerly. One of the women laughed. Ann started at the sound.

But she was staring beyond this little group, trying to see into the shadows across the street. Had she imagined it, or was there a dim figure standing near the trunk of a high, spreading tree?

She felt Crunch's hand on her arm, heard his voice. "I'm sorry—but I guess it's no use. We better go back inside. It's getting mighty cold out here."

"Yes—we might as well," Ann said. Her eyes trailed again toward the tree. Nothing stirred. She told herself it must have been a shadow she had seen.

Lacey De Lane would not hurry out of her apartment, only to stop and watch the building. What would be the sense in that?

And again, Ann asked herself, "What is there of sense in this whole miserable, tangled affair?" She went with Crunch back up the steps, into the warmth of the building, but she had the sensation of a person moving helplessly in a dream.

She heard the door close and she and Crunch stood in the entrance way. She heard the young man say, "Well—?" as though he were speaking for a second time. "Now what?"

"I—I guess we'd better go back upstairs."

"Is there anybody you could call—?"

Ann came wholly to the present then.

"Oh!" One hand flew to her mouth. "I have to hurry and call Gail. She's waiting to hear! What under the sun have I been thinking of!"

The door opened, bringing in a blast of the cold air and a short, white-haired man. He frowned at them in a preoccupied manner, went on past them. Ann saw his feet, the toes turning outward as he went up the steps.

She and Crunch were following closely. Crunch managed to say, "Want to use our phone?"

Ann said, "No. No, thanks. I—I think I'll call from their apartment."

The white-haired man had gone down the hall of the first floor. Ann flew up the remainder of the steps, coming breathlessly to the door of the De Lane apartment. Crunch remained at her side. He must have noticed how her fingers were trembling, how the key scratched at the lock, but he said nothing, until the door was open.

"I'll wait here," he told her.

Ann had obtained one glimpse into the darkness of the room ahead, the emptiness of it, and she turned gratefully to the man at her side.

"Th—thanks," she said.

Crunch pointed. "There's a switch right there."

Ann said again, "Thanks," and turned on the light. She was in a room which was a counterpart in size of the apartment across the hall, but there the resemblance ceased. The walls were a pale green, the draperies yellow. Ann sensed rather than saw the delicate coloring, the graciousness of the tufted furniture, low tables, bookcases.

Why she spoke, she did not stop to think, but as she went into the room, she stood there and said, "Lacey—? Lacey, are you home?"

There was no answer, only Crunch in the hallway. She heard him talking to someone, to Rof Hunt, no doubt.

Her eyes fell on the telephone. It was at the very edge of one of the tables. Below, on a lower ledge, was the directory. Ann thought, as she moved toward it, "I won't look up the number. I'll call information! That will be quicker." Because, even though Crunch and Rof Hunt were in the hallway, within earshot, she wanted to finish her task and leave this place. She felt like an interloper. Unseen eyes seemed to bore into her, questioning eyes that asked what right she had to come.

Ann's feet took her across the room. Her hand moved toward the instrument, and then, shockingly shrill, there came the ringing sound that forced a small cry to her lips, brought her backward as though she had received a physical blow.

Again the telephone rang.

"What's the matter with me!" Ann demanded of her wildly whirling thoughts. "The phone is ringing. Why don't I answer it?"

She lifted the receiver. Her voice came, negative, faltering. "Hello?"

"Hello? Is this the De Lane residence?"

It was Gail calling.

"Yes—yes, Gail."

"Oh—*Ann.*" Disappointment lingered for a moment in her tone, then it rose swiftly. "Is Lacey there? Have you seen her?"

"No, she isn't here, Gail. I haven't seen her." Ann would have gone on to say that Crunch Boyden had thought he had seen Lacey going out a while ago, but Gail talked on in a rush.

"I'm through here now. I'll be coming right home. I wish you'd wait there till I come—would you, Ann?"

"Why—why, yes, I can. If you want me to, Gail."

"I do! Just till I get inside, Ann. I'd appreciate it —so much. I won't keep you. Soon as I get there, you can come on down to the station and wait for Tess. Is that okay?"

"That's okay," Ann said.

She heard Gail's suppressed sigh, the word of vivid thanks, and the receiver clicked at the other end. Ann hung up also, and stood for a long moment looking down at the telephone.

She wanted suddenly to call Gail back, to tell her that she would rather not stay, to tell her that—

Crunch Boyden called from the doorway.

"Find anything?"

Ann turned. "Nothing. I—I guess I didn't really look, though. I—just answered the phone."

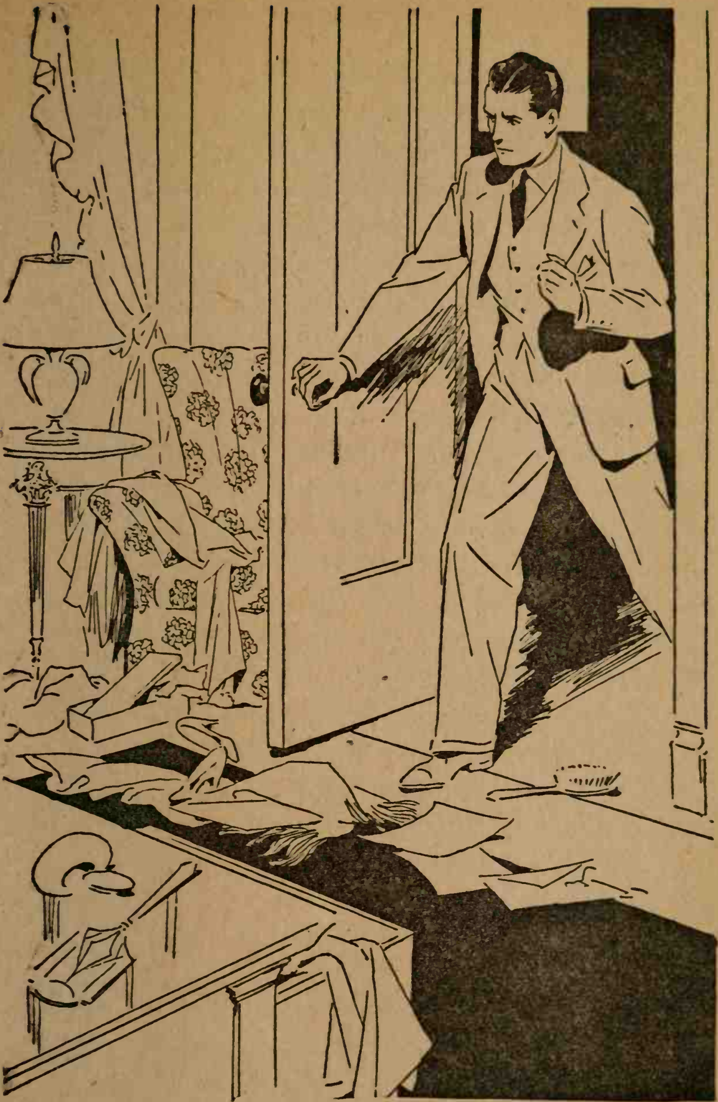
Crunch came into the room.

"Maybe we better have a look around, hm?"

"Look around—?" Ann repeated, and Crunch shrugged lightly.

"I *could* have made a mistake, you know. It might not have been Lacey De Lane I saw, and—."

"Oh, *Crunch!*" Ann felt as though a hand were at her throat. "You mean, maybe she's—*here?* Maybe—!"



Crunch Flung Open the Door

"Take it easy!" A smile played over the long mouth. "I meant maybe she's sleeping. Her bedroom door's shut." He nodded in the direction of a door that gave off a short hallway. "Both bedrooms are shut. Let's have a look-see."

Ann stood rooted to the spot. "I don't think I want to, Crunch."

"Why not?"

"Well—Gail's coming right out. She just called."

"I got that."

"After Gail comes we can look around. Can't we? I feel—like a housebreaker!"

"I don't." Crunch looked proportionately cheerful. "Have a chair and I'll take a squint."

Ann sank into a low chair, but she didn't relax as Crunch strode past her to the hallway, to a door which he flung open. She saw the light flare, heard him moving around. The light went out and he came back, pausing to look into another room which Ann had guessed was there, the room which must be a combination of kitchen and dining nook.

"It was Lacey I saw all right," Crunch said as he came back to Ann's side. "And she left that bedroom in a mess. Her room, not Gail's. Gail's is right next, and it's in good order—."

"Maybe she left in a hurry," Ann offered weakly.

"Hurry is right! The dresser drawers are pulled out and stuff spilled in every direction."

The dresser drawers, Ann thought, and it seemed as though the two arms of the chair in which she sat were a kind of curious vise, holding her against her will, forcing her to see things she did not wish to see.

Gail had found the red-inked invitations in Lacey's dresser. Lacey must have come back to get them. She must have hunted wildly. And then she had hurried out.

Perhaps it had been Lacey after all, that dim shadow near the tree. Perhaps Lacey was waiting there, wondering if Gail would come home. Perhaps she was looking for Gail now. Perhaps they would meet outside the apartment and both come in together. Maybe Lacey would explain the meaning of the things, some reasonable meaning, and Gail would be relieved of her worry. Everything would be all right then. Everything would be—

"A penny—," Crunch said. "I've been talking a blue streak and you haven't heard a word!"

"Oh, I'm sorry." Ann came to her feet. "I was thinking—wishing really."

"Me, too," Crunch said inelegantly, "but along different lines. I'm hungry." Rubbing his jaw, he looked toward his apartment across the hall. "Want to come over and take pot luck? You look rather pinched. Very lovely, you understand—but, well, how about it?"

"I'm having dinner with Tess—after the broadcast."

Crunch lifted a wrist, consulted his watch.

"That's another hour. You better come along with me. Rof's making spaghetti—or made it—I hope."

"But—but *Gail?*"

"We'll leave our door open. We'll hear her when she comes." He took Ann's hand, the free one which was not clutching the big purse. "Come on—maybe Tess can hold out till after the show, but you're having a snack now."

Ann allowed herself to be marshalled out of the room and across the way. She went gratefully. The De Lane apartment was not a place in which to relax, not now.

Rof Hunt met them at the door. He was in more suitable clothing, loose slacks and a white shirt, open at the collar. He held a towel and was wiping off the last stains of the grease paint from his forehead.

His eyes looked searchingly into Ann's face. "You missed her, didn't you?"

He was talking about Lacey, of course. Ann nodded. She could have said, "It was all your fault, Rof Hunt. If you had let me go back when I wanted to, instead of keeping me here to talk about things, I would have seen Lacey." But Rof Hunt must feel badly enough about the matter. After all, Ann reminded herself, Rof Hunt was another well meaning friend. He had been trying to be helpful.

Well, so was she, but thus far she had done nothing but miss Lacey! Slip up on the job, fail Gail when she needed her!

Crunch said, very close to her ear, "None of that now! We're going to grab a bite." He turned to Rof Hunt. "The food on?"

The older man grinned. "Can't you smell it?"

They could, of course, and Ann knew that she was hungry. She saw Crunch rushing to put another plate on the table in the nook, let herself be ushered to a chair.

Without a doubt, Rof Hunt could prepare good food. The spaghetti, the salad, it was all delicious. Little was said at the table, however. She and Crunch complimented the cook, but over the three hung a mood of waiting, of tension. The door was open, and they had their ears ready to catch Gail's approaching footsteps. But it was more than Gail's footsteps. It was what would come after that—after Gail knew that Lacey had come back, and they had missed her.

Rof Hunt said suddenly, "Suppose we don't mention that Lacey came back?"

Ann looked up quickly.

"But—why? I think Gail should know."

"I think this is a job for the police."

Crunch looked at his uncle. "Is it that bad?"

"I think it is."

Ann was shaking her head. "Oh, no—it—it couldn't be. I mean, if—well, I think Gail should be the one to decide that, don't you?"

Rof Hunt was leaning back in the high seat. "Ann," he said, almost solemnly, "you know something about this—more than I do. Want to tell me?"

Ann felt her cheeks grow hot. "I'd like to. Honestly, I would—but I think—."

Gail came then, walking quickly. They heard her pause before her door, heard her say, "Ann—?"

"I'm here, Gail." With a quick word of thanks, Ann slipped from her place and sped across the hall.

"Oh, I'm glad you stayed," Gail said gratefully. "You were over at Crunch's?"

"For supper. It was good."

"I'm glad." Her fingers were fumbling with the key. Crunch must have closed the door, Ann thought, but she had not noticed when he did it. Gail preceded her into the apartment, went from table to table, lighting the lamps. Lastly, the wall switch. The place was much more inviting with Gail there, but still Ann felt no wish to stay. She wanted to go to Tess, to Tess's home, and to that long evening they had promised each other.

But even as she thought of Tess, some nagging inner voice seemed to say slyly, "You won't see Tess —not for a while. You're in this thing too deeply. You can't get out now. You don't want to get out, really. You want to help Gail—don't you?"

So Ann remained standing near the telephone while she watched Gail going into Lacey's bedroom. Gail seemed drawn there from the first. Ann heard her cry out sharply and went to her side.

"Look, Ann! The dresser—!"

It was, as Crunch had said, in a most untidy state. Eager, searching fingers had pulled out the drawers, frightened fingers.

"Maybe," Ann heard her own voice weakly, "maybe she was in a hurry, Gail."

But Gail had the same thought which had come to Ann. The mysterious papers, the red-inked invitations bearing the Sign of the Sphinx. Somebody had come here, looking for them.

It was on the tip of Ann's tongue to say, "Lacey came back, Gail. But she went again. I just missed her," but the words were never spoken.

Afterward, Ann wondered if it mattered terribly whether or not Gail knew that it was Lacey herself who had made this frantic search. Gail would probably have been worried all the more, for it would have proved beyond a doubt how important those crumpled letters were to the woman.

Gail's fingers dug into Ann's arm, as she led the girl back to the living room. "My purse—" she said. "Oh, Ann, give it to me."

It was on the sofa where Gail had flung it as they had come in. Ann took it, put it into Gail's shaking hands.

She watched in what seemed an agony of waiting, and then saw Gail probing in the silken depths. She heard Gail almost sob, "I left them in my desk, Ann! They're—not here."

Ann knew what she meant, and made no pretense of not knowing. Her thoughts raced in a mad jumble as Gail talked on, chokingly. "Before Lorna Patten came, I took them out again. I made myself look at them. I was trying to think—trying to know what I should do. And I forgot to put them back in my purse. Lorna came in, and I put them back in the drawer—and now—!"

"Oh, Gail—" Ann said pityingly, and felt again the press of the woman's hand on her arm.

"Ann, will you go and get them for me?"

"Why—"

"Oh, will you?" Desperation was in her voice, shining in her eyes. "It's a lot to ask you—but Ann, I can't go. I'm frazzled out!"

Gail did not say, "I'm afraid," but Ann knew that she was.

"I don't want to leave now. I want to be here—

in case Lacey comes back. Oh, she's got to come back. She's got to!"

"She will," Ann tried to sound reassuring. "I'm sure she will, Gail."

"Yes. Yes—I'm sure she will, too. That's why I want to be here. I thought—you're going down to meet Tess anyhow. You could stop at the shop—I'll give you my key—"

Ann said, "Maybe Tess and I could go together—?"

"No! No, *please,* Ann, go right away. Get those letters first!" Her eyes darted toward the door. "Crunch would give you a lift down, I know he would!"

Crunch took that precise moment to knock on the door. It had not closed tightly, and he opened it on a crack to call in, "Anything I can do?"

Gail said fervently, "Yes—yes, Crunch. Come on in."

His brows, Ann noted, went up slightly at the sight of Gail's strained face. She begged him, "Crunch, will you give Ann a lift to the shop? I left some—some important papers in my desk. Can you? Right away?"

"Sure," Crunch said. And to Ann, "All set?"

Ann looked from the man standing there to Gail. She was anything but "all set." The idea of going alone up those dusky blue steps into the dark and the quiet, searching Gail's desk for those hateful letters, was almost a terrifying task.

"Maybe," Ann thought, "maybe Crunch could come up with me and get them." But the thought passed, blotting itself out. No, she must go alone. Gail was telling her that now, not in so many words, but Ann knew. Gail did not want any one to know of those invitations.

"You'll get them for me, then?" She looked straight into Ann's wide eyes. "You know what they mean to me, Ann."

Ann nodded.

"I know, Gail. I—I'll get them."

Gail was pressing a key into Ann's hand, pressing her fingers, too, urgently, beseechingly.

"Hurry—won't you?" she said.

"Yes, Gail."

Crunch at the door, spoke. "We'll be there in ten minutes."

Ann went to his side. Gail followed and held the door open wider. She said, as Ann went out, "Call me from the shop," but changed her mind the next instant. "No, no—don't. From the station."

"All right," Ann promised. "And please don't worry, Gail. Everything will be—perfect." And she thought, "If that were only the truth!"

Gail nodded, her mouth twisting.

The two were out in the hall, starting on their way.

Gail called, "Ann—!"

The girl turned, waiting.

"You don't need to come back here, tonight, Ann." Gail spoke in a kind of hushed whisper. "Keep them for me, you understand? I'll get them in the morning. Just so—so I know they're safe."

Ann nodded, tried to send back an encouraging smile, but knew that her attempt was a failure.

She went on down the steps after Crunch's swiftly retreating feet. Looking down, watching those shoes, the sensation of unreality came over her again. She seemed to have lost her identity, to have become someone else, some other girl, wrapped up in a peculiar, twisting labyrinth of fear and doubt. Only a few short hours ago, she had never heard the name of Charles Boyden, Crunch. She could not have imagined that she would be following those shining brown shoes down these red steps.

First there had been blue steps, she thought. And now they were red steps. This was another errand. More important than when she had come here.

Because now no one was in Tess Whitehouse's shop. Now she must go alone on her mission. No friendly door would open to her. She must open the door herself. Go in alone.

She came suddenly to the bottom of the stairs and jostled against Crunch. He murmured absently, "Sorry—," and held the door open.

"I'm sorry," Ann said. "My fault."

They went out the door.

"Thinking again," Crunch accused her, taking her arm. "It doesn't pay. Sometimes you have to barge on ahead—and think afterward."

Barge on ahead. The words rattled around in Ann's thoughts, but the wind was coming at them now with a vengeance, and Ann took a kind of delight in feeling the blast against her face. She heard Crunch say, "My car's around the side here," and followed the way he led her.

Neither spoke for a time. It seemed once that Crunch murmured something that sounded like, "Might snow," and Ann thought, "What difference would that make?" Whether it snowed, or rained, or if hail should fall, the work she had undertaken lay ahead, waiting for her.

When they stopped at the door of a large sedan, Ann was surprised. She had thought Crunch would have a small car.

"A poor thing," the man said, opening the door, "but mine own—for another two weeks." Ann bent her head and got inside. The upholstery was worn all right, but Ann found herself defending it with, "It's not such a 'poor thing.' Any car in a storm, I'd say."

Crunch was in then and the ride back to the shop began. Ann thought, "I have ten minutes until we get there. I won't think about the shop. I won't think about—*any of this.*" She turned to face the man. "Why is the car yours for only two weeks, Crunch?"

"I expect certain papers then. I'll be changing my brand of business."

It said a little and it said a lot. You did not ask young men many questions about their "business" these days. It was one general business, but each one's part was a private affair.

Ann said, "Are you glad?"

"You bet. I've been getting ready a long time."

A small silence fell, not too strained, but Ann had to force herself to find conversation to take her mind off herself. She thought of Rof Hunt.

"Does your uncle know you're taking me down town?" she asked.

"He knows. In fact, I got orders to keep an eye on you."

"On me?" Ann said quickly. "Why?"

"Oh, Unc thinks you'll bear watching, I guess," Crunch said lightly, but not convincingly enough. Ann thought, "Rof Hunt's worried. But he doesn't need to worry about me. I can take care of myself!"

"Can you?" This was that inner cringing self that was afraid, but Ann squelched the terror that crept up in her throat. "What have I got to be

afraid of—really?" she asked herself. "Crunch will let me out and I'll go in. I'll hurry up to Gail's office, get her papers, and hurry out. That's all there is to it. Then I'll go and meet Tess."

It was that simple.

Or was it?

Crunch was saying, "I'd say all this was a little off your beaten track. Right?"

"It is, a little," Ann admitted. "I came to visit Tess. I had planned to leave tonight—but tomorrow will be soon enough."

"I'll notify the Chamber of Commerce."

"Oh, Crunch—no!"

"Don't worry," he assured her promptly, and seemed to lose interest in making conversation. Ann could feel a mood of seriousness descending upon him, like a mantle. "Ann—," he said suddenly.

"Yes?"

"Anything you want to tell me about this stuff you're getting for Gail De Lane?"

"Why—no. I guess not, Crunch."

"Not that I mean to butt in, you understand—"

"Oh, I know. You want to help."

"That's right."

Ann shook her head, holding her lips firmly together. Perhaps it might not help at all to tell Crunch of those hateful letters with that red-scrawled sign. Perhaps there would be nothing he could do, or suggest doing. But it would be a relief to her to share the burden of her thought. Talking about those smudged papers, sharing that secret, that would certainly help.

Only it was not her secret, Ann firmly reminded herself. It was Gail's, and Gail was depending upon her to keep silent.

She said, "There's nothing much to say, Crunch. Just some papers Gail wants. I—I don't think there's anything I could tell you."

"I see." He said it gravely. A red light flashed ahead. The car came to a sharp stop and Crunch looked directly at her. "Well, there's something I can tell you. It might help, and it might not, but—"

"But what, Crunch?"

"I saw Lacey De Lane about noon today."

"You did? Where?"

"In the bank. I wasn't paying strict attention, but offhand I'd say she was drawing out her life's savings."

Ann was leaning back against the seat, staring at him. "Drawing out her life's—" she repeated. "You mean—?"

"The works, yes. I didn't pay much attention at the time, but after the way she acted this evening when I met her, I got to thinking back. She looked queer and hazy then, too. I spoke to her, and she seemed not to hear me. But now I think she did, all right; she simply didn't want me around just then."

The green light beckoned and Crunch gave his attention to the car again. Ann sat rigid at his side, staring ahead. They were in the business section, the heart of the city. Electric signs streaked off and on, red, blue, green, yellow. Lights high overhead, and lights directly before them. But it seemed that two words like balls in a juggler's hands danced back and forth between the lights. *Queer and hazy.* That was the way Lacey had appeared in the bank, when she was taking out her money. That was the way she had acted on a number of occasions. This very evening, not so long ago, she had passed Crunch in front of the apartment, like a sleepwalker.

Queer and hazy.

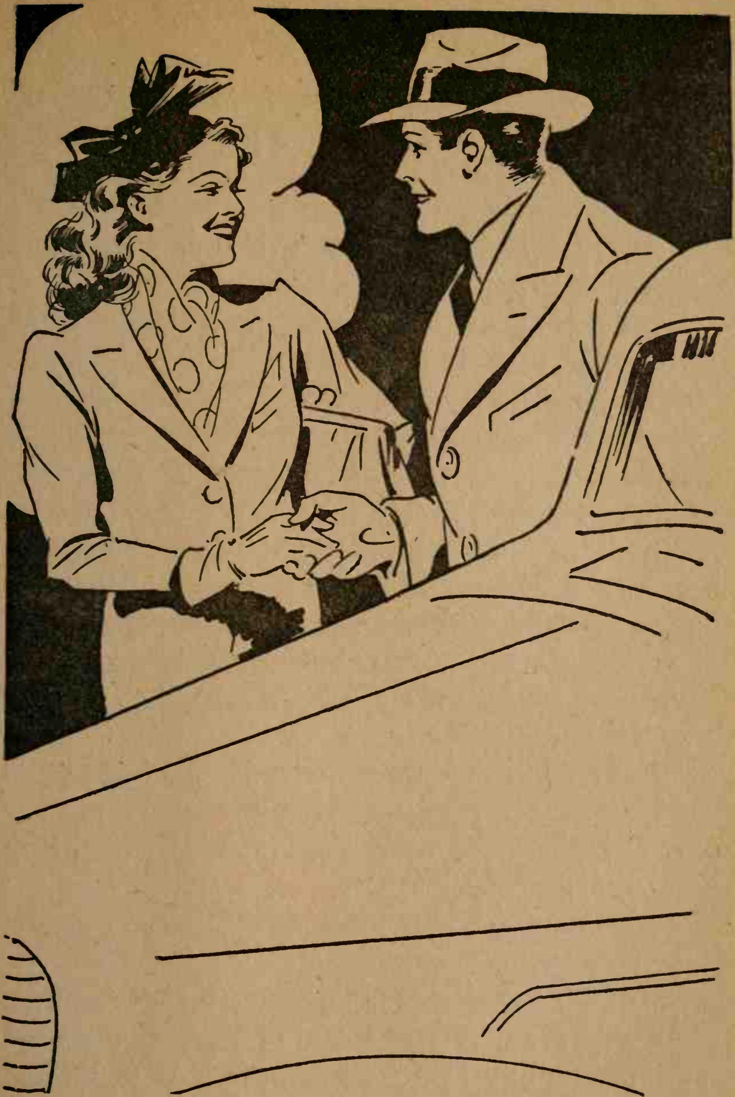
Ann leaned back and closed her eyes. She heard Crunch saying, as though from a distance, "Tired?" Her eyes flew open as they came to the curb outside the neon light which spelled TESS WHITEHOUSE. Crunch said, "Well, here we are."

"Here we are," Ann thought. "No, here I am. I go on from here—not Crunch."

He was holding the door open for her, gave her his hand. "Want me to come in with you?" he asked.

"Oh, no. No, thank you," Ann said hastily.

Crunch seemed to expect this answer. "All right,"



"Want Me to Come in With You?" He Asked

he said. "You going over to the station from here?"

"Yes. I'm going right over. It's only a few steps to the hotel so—."

"So, I won't wait. That it?"

Ann put out her hand. "Thanks a lot, Crunch, for all you've done."

"You're welcome for very little. Wish I could have done more. Well, good luck."

His fingers were firm around her own, then relaxed. He gave her one brief smile and got into the big car. The next moment, it seemed, he was moving on down the street.

With a sense of dismay, Ann watched him drive away. She had expected that Crunch would insist upon going in with her, that he would at least offer to remain on hand to see her to the hotel, no matter how near it was. That he should have gone so readily left her at a loss.

"That's what I wanted, wasn't it?" Ann asked herself sensibly. "I wanted to go alone."

"Not *wanted* to," said the inner voice. *"You have to go alone!"*

"I have to go alone," Ann agreed in her thought. "And I have to hurry."

The wind caught at her hat, and she held it down as she moved closer to the door of the shop. It seemed minutes before her bag was open, before the key was in the lock.

"I seem to be opening one door after another," Ann thought wildly.

The key turned, the door gave in. It seemed almost to open itself. Ann pushed it farther open, farther, and then she was inside. She pulled the key out of the lock and thrust it back into her purse.

She had a wild impulse to rush out again, out to the wind and the cold, but forced herself to shut the door.

When she had come into the shop before, not so long ago, she had stood with her back against the door, looking around, drinking in the beauty that lay before her. But now Ann stood battling the fear that mounted madly in her pounding heart. Now she stood, until she should gain the courage to mount the blue steps that lay ahead.

CHAPTER SIX

TOO BEAUTIFUL

There was no one in the shop except herself. No one.

Ann held this thought tightly, in an effort to free her mind of the iron clasp of fear, to free her taut muscles which seemed caught in invisible bonds of steel. But she felt trapped, helpless to move, numb with an aching chill.

Only her eyes could move, and she looked at the blue steps, stared at them and at the winding white rail that disappeared in a coil over her head.

The neon light flashed, first on one side, then on the other. It was like a metronome of brilliance, beating back and forth. But there must have been another light on the electric sign, a light near the building which stayed on all the time, for the entrance way was not wholly dark. A pale silver gleam tinted the outlines of the chairs, the sofa. And as the seconds passed, the arch where Jacky Dahl had entered became plainer.

Ann thought fleetingly of Jacky Dahl, of her green eyes that had looked so full of concern for Tess Whitehouse. Jacky must have felt concerned about

Gail De Lane, too. Gail had said the whole shop was in a state of unrest. And no wonder.

Even in the quiet of the night, in the silvery glow, the place seemed alive with sound, with movement, with the beat of mysterious, softly marching feet.

"It's all in my mind!" Ann forced herself to believe. "I'm imagining all sorts of foolish things. *There's no one here—but me."*

But her eyes seemed glued on that archway. It seemed that Jacky Dahl was still there, waiting near the dressing table with all its little boxes and jars in their cross-stitch labels.

"This is foolish!" Ann scolded herself. "Jacky's gone home. They've all gone home."

But her feet seemed to carry her over to the archway. She came to where the drapery hung in a thick, looped-up fold, and bending forward she said softly, "Jacky!"

There was no answer, of course. *"You see—?"* Ann told herself. "You are alone. *Now, will you believe it?* Now, will you stop wasting precious time and get on upstairs? It will only take a few minutes to go to Gail's office and get those pesky invitations. Then, you'll be finished with your job. *Finished."*

Something moved directly ahead of her, a hand that came upward, it seemed. Only by a miracle, Ann stifled the scream that gathered achingly against her lips. When she found her voice, it was only a hoarse whisper, a choked sound she did not recognize.

"Who is it?" Ann said. *"Who are you?"*

And she waited for what seemed a break in time, but nothing moved, no sound came from the little room with the dressing table.

Ann's hand went to her throbbing temple, and again she saw a movement before her.

But now she knew.

"My own shadow!" she whispered shakily, a pitiful little whisper that tried to laugh at a misplaced fear. *"I'm seeing myself in the mirror over the dressing table!"*

Resolutely, Ann turned away from the arch, and faced the stairs.

"This settles it," she told herself. "I'm going up there and get this thing over with!"

She was facing the lovely windows at the same time, and the glass on the shelves seemed like so many bright jewels in a setting of deep blue.

"This is Tess's shop," Ann reminded herself. "Maybe Tess is all wound up with worry over Gail's affairs, but it's still Tess's WHITEHOUSE. Nothing terrible could happen here. It's too beautiful!"

Ann had reached the first step. Her left hand went to the railing, and she kept it there while she mounted higher, higher. There was no need to use the rail to guide herself, for as she came upward, the glow from the neon light in front of the store shone even more fully through the large window in the reception room.

Ann made out the high desk where the girls had been seated at the telephones, the gift room. The many pretty pieces there had taken on an even richer glow. It was like the small treasure room of some great queen.

"It's Tess's WHITEHOUSE," Ann thought again, and her heart was beating almost normally.

But she had not the time to linger, nor, even though the air of curious mystery had abated, did Ann wish to linger. It was to the narrow hallway at the right that she must hurry to Gail's blue room.

The door, she saw gratefully, was open. And so was the door of Tess's room directly across. Whatever their troubles might be, they had not touched the shop, Ann thought. Gail had left the place, had left these doors *open*.

The light from out in front did a double duty again. Ann did not need to search for a lamp to turn on. She saw Gail's desk clearly. It seemed to stand out in the slantwise beam that came in through the window. The two figures on the wall above were likewise bathed in the gentle glow. For just an instant, Ann looked up at them. Gail had so dominated the scene when Ann had been here before, she had not taken the time to study the little figures really. She took little time now, but in the deep quiet, where she was all alone, the smaller details stood out so clearly, so vividly. Ann saw that the little statues were intended to be used in a pair, that they belonged together. One was of an old, old man, the other a woman. She was old, too. Ann had noted before the swirling robes on the carved pair, their cheery faces, but now she saw that the woman was holding something in her hand, something that looked like a curious lamp. The aged man was holding a book and looking up from the pages as though he were enjoying the thought of what he had read. Neither of the figures had their eyes focused on the observer, and yet Ann felt that the two were well aware of her presence, that they were watching her, and approving of her.

It was over in an instant, Ann's study of the two, and yet she felt that she would always remember the little statues. What was to happen, the thing that would strike horror anew, when Ann would watch those same figures with flaming eyes, would certainly render them unforgettable.

But Ann could not see into the happenings of the next ten minutes. She was keyed to the present. To the desk. To the need of slipping around behind it, opening the drawer, and taking out the red-smudged invitations.

Ann remembered putting down her bag before she went around to the drawer. Her fingers found the knob with no difficulty and a slight pull was all that was necessary. Her eyes were down, boring into the open drawer. In the right hand corner were the folded sheets. Ann recognized them at once, the shape of the papers, their crumpled appearance, the dull color against the litter of other papers around and beneath them.

She took, almost grabbed, the letters. Clutching them in one hand, she closed the drawer again, and was reaching for her purse when, from some distant point, she heard a muffled, scraping noise. It was as if a door had been opened stealthily, a door which might have had something like a length of rubber matting tacked at the bottom of it to keep out the draught. Or it might have been the sound caused by the movement of a paper carton across a strip of bare floor. Ann did not place the sound at once, not exactly, but on one point she was certain. It had not come from the street. It *was in here, in the shop.*

Her purse was in her hands, and she was holding it tight against her. She had the papers, too, the invitations she had come to get for Gail De Lane. They were crushed against the purse. She did not take time to put them inside it. She could not have done so in that moment. She could not move so much as her little finger. As stiffly as though she had been another of the carved figures, Ann stood rooted to the spot behind Gail's desk, while her eyes stared ahead at the open door, while her ears strained toward the direction from which the sound had come.

It was not repeated, but there was another interruption in the heavy, unbearable quiet. A combination of a sigh of unutterable weariness, and a groan of pain, it seemed to Ann, and her fear urged her now to flight.

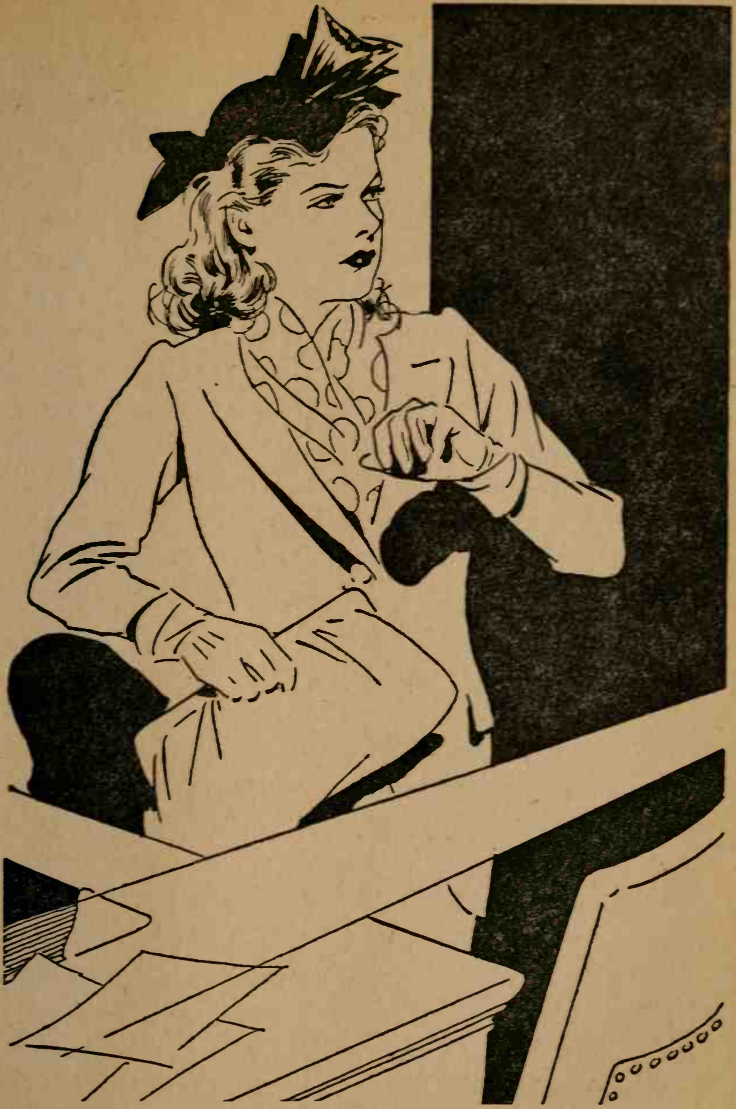
Run! That was the blazing command that seared her brain. *Run!* While there is yet time. Before this person, whoever it is, comes and finds you here.

Ann flew to the door. The letters she held so tightly crackled against her purse.

To be found here would be bad enough. But to be found with—*them!*

Her eyes slashed across the reception room, past the high desk, and there she saw a dancing beam upon the floor, a long line of light that ended at the woodwork at the base of the desk, but did not linger there. It moved, and Ann knew that someone with a flashlight was coming along the gallery, coming stealthily along that hallway lined with pictures.

Escape down the stairs was impossible. She would be seen. There must be another room at the end of the passage where Ann stood, the passage that gave to this room of Gail's and to Tess's office across the way. She saw a door far down at the left. But there



It Was Someone With a Flashlight

was not time to reach that door.

Why she almost leaped across the way, why she sought in that moment of terrified waiting the sanctuary of Tess's office, Ann did not know. She acted blindly, upon impulse.

It was perhaps because this was Tess's WHITEHOUSE. Tess's office was safer, surer. Ann had never been in that private room of Tess's; she had only glimpsed the green and gold of it.

Now she was there, and not a moment too soon. The beam of light was cutting across the reception room, along the floor. It was cutting across the passage where Ann had sped a moment ago.

There had not been time to close the door of Tess's office. Whoever it was who was moving nearer would have heard the sound. The light in Tess's office was hazy, because this room did not benefit by the neon light in front of the shop. As Ann stepped behind the door, it seemed at first that she was plunged into total darkness.

But as the minutes crawled past, slowly, heavily, Ann's eyes became accustomed to the dull glow which seeped through the passage from Gail's room. Only once she glanced about her, and she saw Tess's desk, longer, wider. This whole room was larger than the one from which she had come.

The one to which the person was going now!

As though she had received a physical shock, Ann realized that the footsteps were heading toward Gail's room. She had left it not a second too soon!

Who was it? Who held that flashlight? Would the person only hesitate at Gail's door—and then come in here, to Tess's room?

Ann's fingers tightened around the papers. They gave off a small, crackling sound, but to her taut nerves it was as though thunder had crashed. She thought frantically, "I've given myself away! He heard that! He knows I'm in here now!"

Why she did not know, but she thought the intruder was a man. Not that the footsteps were heavy. They were muffled, too subdued to guess who it was who came so stealthily.

Whoever it was, Ann thought suddenly, that person did not want to be discovered either!

Then the beam of the flash darted into the room where she was standing, and it seemed that Ann ceased to breathe. She held herself back, touching the wall, so that if the door were thrust open, she would not be discovered.

But the light moved away as soon as it had come, and again Ann heard the heavy steps going, she was certain, into Gail's room.

Could it be possible that someone else knew of those papers in Gail's desk? Had someone else seen her put them there? Or heard her ask Ann to get them?

Was this person coming now—to get the red-inked invitations, the hateful letters that Ann held in her clenched fingers?

She waited again, for what seemed an age of agony, trying to catch the sound of that desk drawer opening. Because the desk drawer would be opened. If someone else knew the papers were here in the shop, that same person would know where they were.

But there was no sound of a drawer being opened. It seemed the sigh was repeated, a muttered whisper, but that was all.

Then why? Why was that person in Gail's office? If it were not for the letters bearing the Sign of the Sphinx—then what was the cause for all this thievish stealth?

"Maybe it's one of the girls coming back for something she forgot," Ann thought, made herself think. "Maybe this isn't a thief at all, but someone who has a perfect right to be here—more of a right than I have."

But Ann had a right to be here. Gail had sent her, had begged her to come.

A feeling of dizziness came over her, a gray weight that seemed too heavy to be borne.

"I mustn't give in like this," Ann told herself. "I haven't done anything for which I need to be ashamed."

The folded papers in her hands crackled again—a mockery to her thought. Just having these hateful things in her possession seemed to link her with something evil, some mysterious and sinister force. Ann wished with all her heart that she might throw the things away, fling them far across the room.

But that would bring the one from Gail's room. It was so quiet. She would be heard.

"Just the same, I'm going to get these papers in my purse," Ann decided. "I'm not going to be found holding them."

The clasp of her purse was two large bead-like knobs of amber. She twisted them, opened her bag, and put the letters inside. With another twist, the purse was closed again. And she felt better. Much better.

She moved away from the wall a little, coming nearer to the door, to the slight opening. The person with the flashlight was still in Gail's office, but Ann was certain there had been no attempt to search the desk.

The WHY grew so stubbornly in her mind, that she came close to the opening, looked out into the narrow hallway.

No light had been turned on in Gail's room. And it seemed the flash had been extinguished. Whoever was in there was pursuing his stealthy task by the light of the electric sign in front of the shop.

Ann thought, "It must be someone who knows the shop. Perhaps it is one of the girls after all!"

But one of the girls would not come in like this, come creeping in like a thief. Who was it? What did he want?

Ann thought of Tess. Perhaps this was some enemy of Tess's. It seemed incredible that Tess might have an enemy. If she had, she did not know the person. Ann had heard Tess say, "If I have any enemies, I don't know 'em!" She shook her head. No, Tess had friends, friends by the hundreds.

But there were jealous people, spiteful people. Perhaps this was a jealous, spiteful person, coming here to do Tess some serious harm. Right now, Tess must be on the air. Ann had lost track of time, but surely Tess's program must be almost over. Perhaps Tess should be warned, perhaps some danger threatened her, something she never dreamed about!

Ann thought of the layout of the shop, its location in the business block. The Cole Hotel was not far away. Next to the entrance of the WHITEHOUSE was the book nook, next came the florist's shop and then the hotel. That was on the street floor. But the second floor of the shop spread out. The long room where the dryers were must extend over to meet an alleyway. Perhaps from one of those windows, Ann could look over to the windows of the hotel.

Concern for Tess gave her the courage to open the door still wider. It seemed that there must be some way of communicating with the outside world. If she were to dash out into the narrow hall, dash through the reception room, then she could slip into one of the curtained booths. They led along the wall. She could go on down the line, and perhaps she could find that window.

If only the person in Gail's office would stay there a moment, two or three minutes longer!

Poised for flight, Ann stood and looked into the room across the way. She saw the desk, but above it, directly in the path of the neon light, she saw a hand reaching upward.

As though turned to stone, all thought of flight forgotten, drained from her, Ann stood watching the fingers of that upraised hand. She still was not certain if it were a man or a woman who was in there. No red-tinted fingernails gave her the clue. The hand looked strong, but thin. And it was reaching toward the statue of the little old man!

Bewilderment gave place to fear as Ann wondered in amazement, "Why would anyone want to take *that?*"

But someone did want the quaint figure. The fingers tightened around the cheery face, blotting it out, bringing it down. The little old man was placed on Gail's desk. But he was not alone there. The companion figure, that of the little old woman, was there, too!

Ann's thought whirled back to Tess, and from Tess to Gail. This person who had taken down the little statues must be simply a thief, not anyone who could really harm either of the two women.

But if he—or she—is a thief, Ann's thoughts ran on, then why take the little statues? There are so many things in the gift room. Why come back here to Gail's room?

Perhaps the statues were the most valuable thing in the shop. Perhaps they were only the first to be taken. Maybe the thief meant to make a selection in the gift room, too.

Ann had drawn on a courage of which she had not suspected. She remained in the room, halfway behind the door, and watched to see what would happen next.

For a moment, nothing happened. The statues remained where they had been placed, on Gail's desk. The little old man had his book, the old woman had her lamp. They stood side by side, smiling cheerfully, and looking very much out of place.

But something else was out of place; something was moving. It was the shadow of that reaching hand. Ann saw the dark outline first and then again she saw the fingers reaching upward. And this time the hand grew until she saw the length of an arm in a long, dark sleeve. She saw a shoulder, the brim of a hat—a woman's hat.

Ann almost breathed aloud, *"It's—a woman!"* But she must have made no sound, for the hand went on upward, to first one shelf and then the other. It was at the shelf nearest to the lighted window that the fingers paused, exploring the wall directly over it, the space which had been covered by the figure.

There must have been a hidden spring, for suddenly a small opening appeared. A tiny door had flung itself open. The fingers probed inward, and came out at once with what looked like a miniature sack. Then the opening closed.

"It wasn't the figures," Ann thought, holding her hand to her parted lips. "It's—it's something that was in there, in the wall."

Something hidden in a wall opening, a secret place. This could be known to only a few. Certainly not to everyone in the shop.

Ann shook her head. The thoughts were crowding too fast, too furiously. And again, she saw a movement at the desk.

The figures were taken again, lifted back to the shelves where they belonged. Ann was not certain, but it seemed she heard the voice murmuring again.

What had been taken? Who was the woman?

And what, oh, what should Ann do next?

Step out boldly? Demand an explanation? Ask her who she was and why she had come here like a thief to Gail's private office?

The woman thought she was alone. Ann might startle her so that she would confess the truth, put back the thing she had taken.

But suppose the woman were not alone? Suppose there were others with her, waiting at the back of the shop?

It was such a large place, with so many winding ways.

Still, the honest indignation that Ann felt was mounting higher, crowding out her fear. "I'll do it!" she thought resolutely. "I'll—."

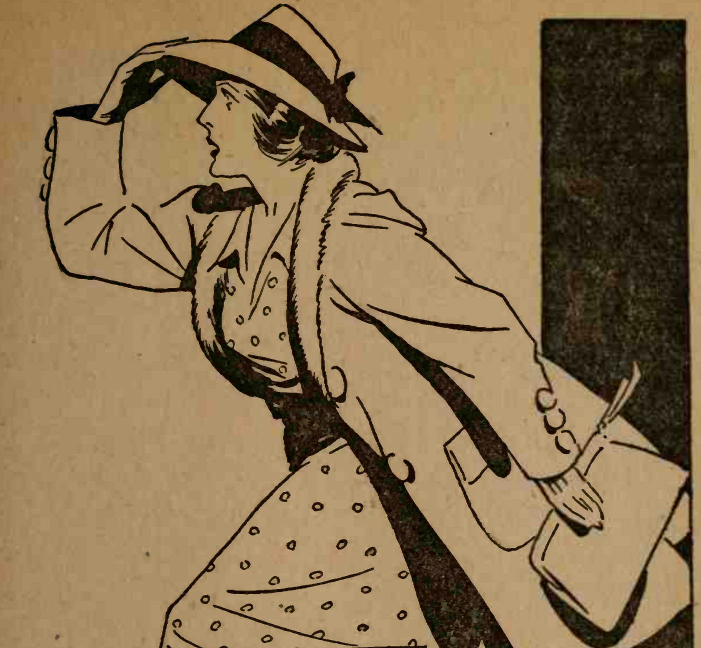
And in that instant, the door of Gail's room came wide open. The woman had opened it, but she did not come out into the narrow hallway at once. She stood with her back against the door, looking back at the wall where the figures stood. Ann saw the side of her face clearly, the delicately sharp nose and the somewhat pointed chin. The woman's hat was down a little over her eyes.

Ann saw, too, the dark coat with the small fur collar, the fleck of white in the woman's dress, and she thought of what Crunch had said.

Lacey De Lane wore a coat with a "skinny fur collar," and her dress with dots in it.

Lacey De Lane!

Ann's eyes went wide and her lips parted to call



The Woman Ran

out to the woman, to shout her name. But even as she recognized, or was certain she knew who this must be, the woman ran, almost darted out of the doorway, and seemed to fly away toward the reception room.

Ann found her voice, the power of motion. She went out after her, calling, "Lacey! Lacey—wait!"

Ahead, near the telephone desk, Ann saw the woman pause a moment, or it seemed she stopped. Certainly she cried out in horrible fear. She had not turned on the flashlight again, but the changing light in front of the shop caught her, just for a moment. Then she turned and bolted toward the gallery.

Ann called again, "Lacey, wait! Please wait! I'm a friend!"

But Lacey De Lane, if this were really she, could not have heard that much, if she heard any of it. The sharp slamming of a door closed Ann away, came with a slapping finality.

The woman knew the ins and outs of the shop better than Ann did. She had made her escape.

It was like riding a high wave, and being dashed back against a lonely stretch of sand. Ann stood in indecision, wondering if she should rush on down the gallery, try to find the door through which the woman had gone, or if she should hurry on out the front door and to the hotel.

That, she decided instantly, would probably be the wisest thing to do. She would find Tess. Tell Tess what had happened. Tess would know what to do.

And then she would call Gail and tell her the papers were safe.

But Lacey was more important to Gail than the strange invitations. It was because Lacey had disappeared that Gail was frantic with worry.

"Oh, what's the matter with me!" Ann thought miserably. "I've got to go after her. I've got to find her!"

There was the gallery ahead, long and dim, the end of it a pool of darkness. Lacey knew the way. Lacey could run to one of the many doors which branched to right and left. Ann had only come here once, and it had been in a flurry of meeting the various ladies. Certainly she had not formed a plan of the place in her mind. She tried to think which door might give to a back exit, and as she stood, uncertainly, there came out of the darkness, from under her very feet, it seemed, a low and long-drawn moan of pain.

Ann heard a cry, sharp and high, her own voice. *"Oh—! Who is it?"* It seemed she fell backward against the high desk. She felt the press of the wood, hard and cool, and willed that a door might open some place of refuge, where she might hide from the terror that held her.

There was only silence, heavy, merciless, and then again the moaning sound was repeated, more long drawn out this time.

Ann's head turned in the direction from which it had come, from behind the high desk. Someone was back there. Someone who was hurt, and moaning in pain.

Because of her state of terror, the realization came ponderously slow. When, for a third time the almost animal-like cry was repeated, and when there came a sound as though someone were trying to move over the floor, Ann seemed to thaw, became capable of motion.

She moved quickly around to the end of the high desk, and here again she received some benefit from the neon light out in front. Its rays flashed in at the back of the desk. Ann could see the several chairs there. She saw two standing upright, and another chair, overturned and backward on the floor. Near it was a girl. She was lying awkwardly, and Ann soon knew why. Her hands were bound behind her back. Her ankles were bound, too. She moved her head upward and Ann saw her face, saw the cloth over her mouth. And she recognized Jacky Dahl!

CHAPTER SEVEN

WILD GOOSE CHASE

It could have been only a matter of seconds that Ann stood there, looking down into the face of the red-haired girl. But her thought in that small time ranged far, whirled in a mad circle.

What was Jacky Dahl doing here, bound and gagged, behind this desk? Jacky belonged downstairs, in the lovely dressing room, in the entranceway. Not so long ago Ann had been remembering how she looked there, had almost thought that she was there.

But she was here, up here, lying helpless.

For how long?

She must have been here before Ann had come in, for certainly the woman who had just left could not have done this, not while Ann had been in Gail's room, or in Tess's. This had happened—before.

But why? Why should anyone do this to Jacky?

Ann was not only thinking now, she was acting. It was as though her knees bent to the floor of their own accord, as though her fingers began without her knowing it, to tug at the cloth about Jacky

Dahl's mouth. Ann felt as though she were a diver, far below the depths of some mysterious sea. She was working feverishly, and yet could accomplish so little. She was forced to some miserable slow motion, while her mind blazed.

She heard herself talking to Jacky, and felt a sense of shock. Her voice was not betraying her. The words came soothingly, kindly.

"It's all right, Jacky. I'll have these off in a minute."

That was the way doctors and nurses worked. Underneath they might be seething, boiling, but outwardly they were calm, keyed to the necessity of administering to a sufferer. Muscles went on working, lips went on talking quietly, but the work had to be done quietly, easily.

When the gag was off, Jacky gave a long sigh. "O—oh." She turned on her side when Ann reached for her wrists. She said, almost like a child, "They hurt."

It seemed like a cord at first that held her hands together, but it was not. It was a silken tie, slender and long. The sash for a dress, Ann guessed. That was what it looked like. The thing had been pulled so, that Ann did not make her discovery until a little later, when she was twisting at the cord around Jacky's ankles. It had the same feel as the other, but a different look. It had been bound more smoothly, around and around. As Ann had it opened, and was about to toss it aside, the light came in from the sign, and she saw, against the dark color of the material, the round white dots spattered over it.

White dots. White dots were on Lacey De Lane's dress.

If that woman *were* Lacey De Lane.

But how could she have done this? She had just come in, and had rushed madly out again.

And, above the rest, why would Lacey want to harm Jacky Dahl?

Ann voiced none of her thoughts. Her voice went on gently, as her arms slipped around the girl under her arms, lifting her to a sitting position. "Is that better, Jacky? Take it easy, now. You're all right. I'll take good care of you."

"You'll take good care of her!" Ann's thought scoffed at herself. "That's a big order. You'd better take good care of both of you. Yourself, too. Things are happening here, horrible things. There's danger beyond that dark gallery—danger!"

Jacky leaned her head back against Ann's protecting arm. "I'm so glad you came, Miss Sheridan," she said it haltingly, but with a fervent gratitude that stung Ann's eyes. She said to herself, "I won't fail her. Whatever it is—I won't give in!"

"Jacky," she said aloud, "do you want me to get you a drink of water?"

"No!" The girl's hands came up, grabbing at Ann's arm. "No, please, don't leave me. I—I'm—."

Ann did not give her time to say she was afraid.

"Don't worry, I won't leave you." Her arms tightened around the shaking girl. "Do you think you could stand up? If I helped you?"

"Yes—yes! I've got to get up. I want to get out of here!"

"All right," Ann said quickly, "hold on tight."

The girl swayed as she came to her feet. She leaned against Ann with a surprising weight. Jacky, because of her helplessness, had seemed somehow little, small. But she was taller than Ann.

She must have realized that she was a burden, for she reached toward the desk and leaned against it. Ann drew the nearest chair to her. With a sigh, Jacky seated herself.

"Soon as I get my breath," she said shakily, "we'll go. But my feet feel numb. And my head's splitting."

Her hands went to her head, and a rueful cry broke from her lips.

Ann said, "What is it, Jacky?"

"Feel there," the girl said. "Easy. Some bump, isn't it?"

Ann's fingers gently touched the spot at the base of her head. A nasty swelling told of a fall, or—something else. Ann's eyes darted toward the gallery. All was quiet there. She looked toward the row of curtained booths, the small cubicles which had been so pretty with their flowers and butterflies only a few hours ago.

They were not pretty now. They had a secretive look. The curtains hung ghostlike at the window. The windows were closed. There was no wind, but Ann thought the soft material swayed.

She shook her head quickly to clear it. She said, "Jacky, can you tell me what happened?"

The girl had her elbows on the lower shelf of the desk and was resting her head in her hands. She looked up. "Some of it, Miss Sheridan. Not all."

"Tell me."

"Well—," Jacky pushed back the hair from her forehead, "I came back to get a letter. I promised Sylvia I'd mail it for her. She had an important date, and she was afraid she'd forget it." As swiftly as she had talked, Jacky broke off. Her eyes traveled the way Ann's had done, down the gallery. She seemed to choke.

Ann prodded relentlessly, urgently. "Yes, Jacky? You came back to get the letter?"

"Yes." The girl nodded. She looked at Ann, fixedly, as though she were forcing her thoughts to be quiet. The light came in and showed her eyes, almost staring. She said in a rush, "I forgot the letter and so I came back for it. I came in the front way. I have a key. I—I didn't turn on any lights because Gail—Miss De Lane had just left. If the lights are on here, the women come. We're open some nights, you see. I didn't want a lot of customers flocking in." She took a quick breath. "Besides, there's enough light from our sign in front. So—it was kind of dark—to see anything—anything scary, I mean."

Anything scary.

Ann thought, "It must have been just that!" But she kept pity away. She felt that what Jacky had to tell her was important, very important. And she had a sense of having to know *now*. They must leave, as soon as Jacky had told her, as soon as Jacky could walk on her aching feet, but first of all, Ann must *know*.

"What did you see, Jacky?" Almost like a teacher saying, "How much will three apples cost?" But the tone served. It kept Ann more firm and smoothed the way again for the green-eyed girl.

Jacky said, looking toward the reception room, "I came up there, up the stairs. You don't make much noise on that thick, blue carpet. You can hear someone coming *down*, but not *up*. So—she didn't hear me."

Ann said, and could not disguise her eagerness, *"She?"*

"Yes. That—that woman. She was here, at the desk. Using the telephone."

"Didn't you see her, Jacky?"

"Well—yes. But I was so surprised! I thought no one was here. I knew Miss De Lane was the last one to go. So it couldn't have been one of the customers. I—I don't know what I thought really. I stopped and—"

"You didn't recognize her then?"

"No, I didn't. I don't know who she was. I didn't really see her face. Things," Jacky swallowed, "things happened so fast."

There was a small silence, but filled with the need to hurry, to hurry and hear what Jacky had to tell, to hurry away from here.

Ann said, "She was at the telephone, you said? Did you hear what she was saying?"

"Yes, I did." The answer came promptly. "I heard her say, 'To the Stop-Off.' And then she listened awhile. She said, 'I'll have to wait then.' And that was all."

"To the Stop-Off," Ann repeated. "You're sure of that, Jacky?"

"I'm positive. Those words rang in my head till I wanted to scream. You see, I wasn't so terribly scared—not then. I thought first of all, I'd better go and see who she was. I went over to her and just as she finished talking on the phone she started to run toward the reception room. I was on the way over here, and we ran smack into each other." Jacky pointed to the edge of a table. "I fell and hit my head—there."

Ann felt a surge of relief. She said, "Oh, you hit your head," and Jacky must have thought it a mild censure.

"Silly, wasn't it? But I remember falling. I remember the smack. It was a good one. And I kept thinking, 'To the Stop-Off. I'll have to wait then.' " She gave a rueful little laugh. "I must have passed out of the picture. When I woke up—you were here."

"And you," Ann thought, "were tied hand and foot with the sash of Lacey De Lane's dress. With what I *think* was the sash of Lacey's dress."

But there was something more important than going back. Jacky had told all she could remember, but maybe that was enough. Maybe that was all that Ann needed to know.

"All I need to know for what?" Ann caught herself up abruptly, and the answer came flashing, "To find Lacey De Lane. Because she needs you!"

Did Lacey De Lane need her? Ann tried to think straight through the meandering tangle of her thoughts. Little explosions of light seemed to dart, small pictures of the woman Ann had never been positively sure she had seen.

It seemed incredible that Lacey De Lane could fit into them all, the Lacey that Tess knew, the Lacey who was Gail's sister-in-law.

She was a lovable person. But lately she had been acting strangely. This very day she had had a hurried visitor, a girl who had come to the apartment. Then Lacey had gone out. Rof Hunt had seen her, and he had noted that she looked curiously out of her pleasant character.

Crunch had seen her, too, that day. Twice. At the bank, where she was drawing out her savings, and again that very evening, coming out of the apartment building. Lacey had looked past him, had seemed not to know him.

Then, a little while ago, she had been here, in Gail's office. She had taken a tiny sack from a secret opening behind one of the little statues.

But *before that,* she had been here, at the desk telephone. Jacky Dahl had found her here, had heard what she said. Then she had literally bumped into Jacky. The girl had been struck unconscious, and Lacey had bound her, gagged her.

It did not make sense.

"Why under the sun should I think that Lacey De Lane needs me!" Ann wondered, almost indignantly.

And she thought of Gail. Gail who was waiting for the letters. She thought of Tess. Tess who must be waiting at the station, her program and her public well served.

Jacky Dahl had come to her feet. She was saying something. Ann did not catch the words, and said, "What, Jacky?"

"I think she was calling a cab," Jacky said. "But I never heard of the 'Stop-Off.' " She tested her weight. "But there's lots I don't know about the town here," she added. "I've been plenty busy since I came."

Like a grain of wheat in a scattering of chaff, one idea stood out for Ann.

"You think this—this woman was calling a cab, Jacky?"

"Yes, I do. That's what it sounded like to me."

Ann's arm was still about her. "You can make it now?"

"I think so." The girl took one step, then another. "Yes, I can!" She spoke eagerly. "Let's get out of here, Miss Sheridan."

"Ann."

Jacky squeezed her hand. "You've been grand—Ann. I don't know what—." She stopped, watching Ann bend down and pick up the two ends of dotted silk, and the handkerchief which had been about her mouth. She said quickly, "Why—?"

But Ann was stuffing the straggling ties, the handkerchief, into her bag. "Just a notion of mine," she explained briefly. "Jacky—?"

"Yes?"

"Have you ever met Lacey De Lane—Gail's sister?"

The girl was at first surprised. "Why, no." She smiled. "But I've heard so much about her. Gail—Miss De Lane—thinks the world and all of her."

"She's never been in the shop?"

Ann could not see Jacky's face now, for they were walking away from the changing light, toward the head of the stairs. But she felt the girl's surprise building up.

"Why, no," Jacky said. "I mean, she's never been in the shop when I was here."

Ann said, thoughtfully, "Oh." They were at the stairs, going down. Jacky would probably have said, "Why? What makes you ask?" but she remembered a half-done duty.

"Sylvia's letter!" she cried. "It's still at the desk. I—I'll get it. Wait here."

"Can you make it?" Ann came back to the top of the stairs.

"Oh, sure—but don't go away."

"I won't."

Jacky moved with quick, sure steps back toward the high desk while Ann stood where she was. Her eyes went to the narrow hallway, toward the open door of Gail De Lane's office.

"It doesn't make sense!" she thought, and a picture of the woman she had seen briefly came back. Not the grasping hands that had reached upward, bringing down the little statues. But the figure that had paused for a moment there against that door, looking back at the room. Ann could see the features still, clear and clean, and thinking of the woman's face, a thought new and different came to Ann.

Regret. That had been in the woman's face. And suffering. As she had stood there against that door, it had been to say a sort of a reluctant farewell.

Lacey De Lane needs you!

There it was again, like a record that played on for a while and then stuck on a discordant note.

Ann fought the thought. "But while she stood there, Jacky was lying back of that desk. If she tied Jacky up like that, and then came back here again to take whatever was in that little sack, perhaps her regret and suffering weren't so real after all."

But the thought persisted. "Lacey De Lane needs you!"

Jacky had come back, holding the letter. She took Ann's arm eagerly and her hand felt warm and confiding. Ann welcomed it.

Jacky said, "You have your purse," and gave a small sigh. "We can go right on down. My coat and hat are in the alcove. I left 'em there—force of habit, I guess."

They were walking down together in the quiet and the silver light that came from the lower window in a feeling of unity, but Ann sensed that one of them had made a misstep. Not herself—Jacky. It was rather strange that Jacky, who was coming back solely to get a letter she had forgotten to mail for a friend, should first of all remove her hat and coat and leave them down in the archway dressing room.

She said nothing, however, but when they came to the foot of the stairs, waited while Jacky went in and brought out her wraps. It took only the space of a few moments. The girl went through the actions as though it were an oft-performed task, rushing in, taking her things, putting them on.

"Perhaps she did leave them there from sheer force of habit," Ann thought, and some of her mood transferred itself to the green-eyed girl. She said, looking directly at Ann, "What is it, Miss—Ann?"

"I—I was thinking," Ann said, and managed to smile. "I'm a little confused. Sometimes you can't be sure if a person is a friend of yours, or not."

Jacky read no hidden implication. Her green eyes were steady.

"That's so. I've felt that same way. And when something like that happens—!" She glanced upward and Ann could feel the chill that went through her. "You just can't figure it out. And *here,* of all places!"

Ann thought, "I believe her. She wouldn't let Tess down. Jacky is true blue. Everything she told me is the truth."

But that made it all the more important that Jacky must keep it secret. Ann realized suddenly that what Jacky would probably do would be to get in touch with Tess, or perhaps with Gail, and if she were to tell Gail what had happened, if she were to remember some detail that would betray Lacey's movements, Gail would be frantic with fear. Ann knew suddenly and surely that Gail must not know—not yet.

She said, "Jacky, I'm going over to the station now to meet Tess. I'll tell her what happened. Not right away—but later on, when we get to her home. She's—she's had a full day."

"Oh," it was with a depth of relief, "I'd be so glad if you would! Then I can go right home."

"Yes—do. And take care of that bump."

"Oh, it doesn't hurt so much now. I'm all right."

"You're sure? Can you get a ride home?"

Jacky was smiling now. In the silvery light she looked like a very happy little girl. "The streetcar's just a block away. Don't you worry about me. Take care of *you.*"

They went out together. Ann had forgotten the wind. It was still raging and it seemed the air had taken on more chill. Ann had worn her jacket in-doors and felt the change.

"You're cold!" Jacky squeezed her hand. "Hurry into the hotel." She pointed in the opposite direction, toward the music store on the nearest corner. "I go this way."

Ann said, "Good luck!"

She thought Jacky said, "Same to you!" and they parted. Despite the whipping wind, Ann paused for a moment and let her eyes go up and down the street. Lacey De Lane had gone out of another door, some back way to the beauty shop, and was probably far away from here by this time. But still Ann felt her nearness, felt as though at any moment she would see the slender figure in the dark coat with the hat that came low over her eyes.

It was another figure, a much taller one, that seemed to emerge from the shadows before her. A low voice said, "I thought I was seeing double."

Ann paused with a start before the place that was called Ye Book Nook. Here was the sunken entrance Ann remembered seeing late that afternoon. Crunch had been standing there. Now he stood at her side.

Ann said, "Oh—Crunch."

"You don't seem too pleased."

"But I am. Only—." She was going to say, "Only so much has happened, I can't think very straight. I don't know which way to turn." She said aloud, "I thought you'd gone on."

"Not very far," he said wisely. "I had a hunch I might be useful." He jerked his head back to the entrance of the WHITEHOUSE. "How come there were two of you? Wasn't that Jacky Dahl?"

"Yes. She was in the shop. She went back to get a letter she had forgotten."

Crunch had moved downward on the steps and Ann came to his side. She realized that his hand was on her arm. He said, "You look like you'd seen a ghost."

"A ghost—?" Ann pulled away a little "I've got to meet Tess—"

"Never mind. You'll meet her in good time. I want to tell you something."

Ann knew it was important. She looked up into his face.

Crunch said, "I just saw Lacey De Lane."

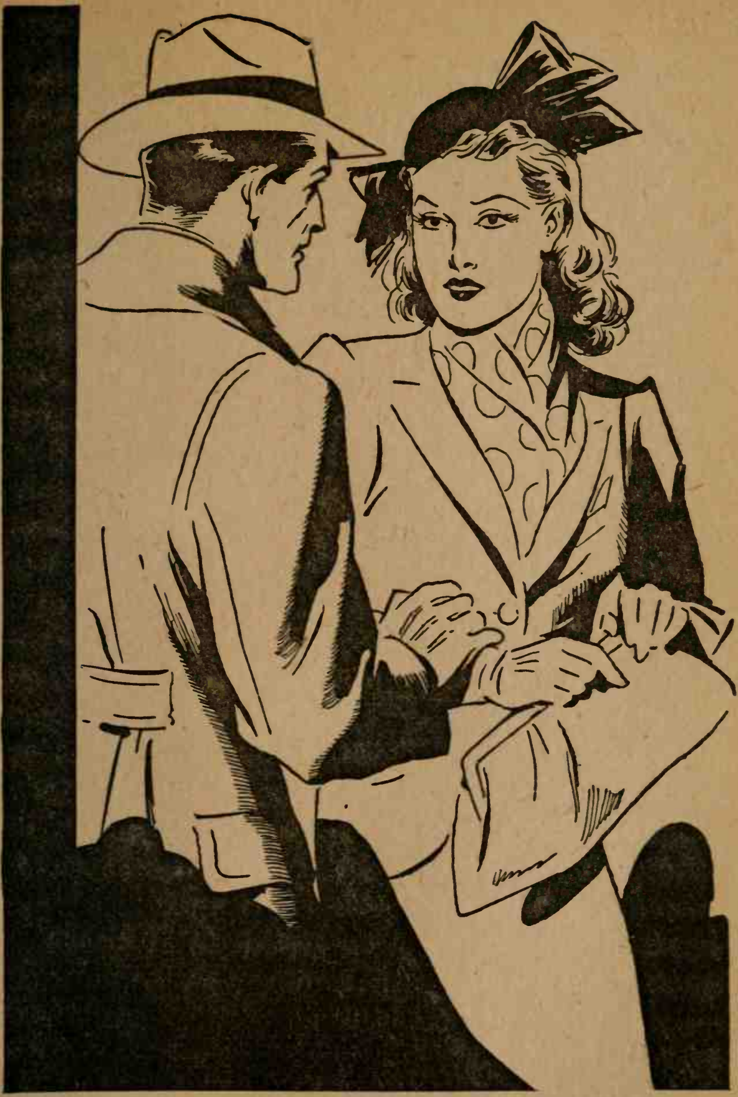
"You saw—Lacey De Lane!" Ann said, and thought, "Then it must have been she! Who else could it have been!" She said, taking the man's arm, *"Where,* Crunch?"

"Around the corner. Where I was parked. I went back to get my cigarettes and I saw her getting into a cab."

"Then she *was* calling a cab!"

The man eyed her swiftly. "Did you see her, too?"

"Tell him!" prodded her thought. "Tell him what happened. You can't figure this thing out



"You Look Like You'd Seen a Ghost."

alone. It's a wild goose chase you're on. You think you've gone a long way so far, but there's more ahead, much more. And Lacey De Lane needs your help!"

"Yes," Ann said, "I saw her, Crunch. She was up there, in—in the WHITEHOUSE."

"You're sure it was Lacey De Lane?"

"I think so. Yes, I'm sure. Jacky—Jacky saw her before I did." The chill was seeping through Ann's suit. "Jacky heard her talking on the telephone."

Crunch almost snapped, "What did she say?"

"Lacey? She said," Ann searched through the maze for the exact words and found them, " 'To the Stop-Off.' And then she said, 'I'll have to wait then.' "

"The Stop-Off," Crunch repeated, and Ann asked, "Do you know where that is?"

"I know." He nodded. "She must have been calling a cab all right. Said she'd have to wait." He gave a grunt that told of concentrated thought, then grabbed Ann's arm. "Well, we better get going."

"Get going—?" Ann repeated vaguely.

"We're following Lacey," Crunch told her.

Ann protested, "But I'm to meet Tess at the station." She glanced ahead to where the entrance to the hotel yawned brightly. "She'll be worried. And Gail! I promised to call Gail."

"You got the—whatever they were—papers for her, didn't you?"

"Why—yes, but—"

"And Tess is okay. She'll wait for you."

"But, *Crunch—!*"

His hand on her arm was gripping almost too tightly for comfort. Ann looked dazedly into his face. It had a set look. She wanted to say, "But, *why,* Crunch?" but the words froze on her lips. There was no laughter in his dark eyes now. They were deadly serious. Charles Boyden was a man with a set will, and for an instant Ann was a little afraid of him.

"It's—important," he said earnestly. "I think Tess and Gail can wait—but not Lacey. I'm worried about her, Ann. I think she—needs a little help now."

"I've been thinking that, too," Ann confessed. "Are you going to follow her to the Stop-Off?" Ann would have added, "What is it?" but there was no time. Crunch had taken her arm again and was leading her along the windy street.

They came to the entrance of the hotel. The man's head never moved but Ann strained to catch a glimpse of Tess. She *might* be just coming out. It would take only a moment to say that her errand for Gail had been accomplished, and she would join Tess later. Then neither of them would worry.

But Crunch marched her on, past the hotel, past another shop window, and another. Ann was protesting, "But it would take only a moment, Crunch. Why can't I—"

"A moment!" The man snorted. "You'd never break away from that bunch. Tess is public property." He grinned suddenly down at Ann. "You ought to know about that."

Ann knew well enough what it meant to serve an adoring public, the joy of it, and the discomfort, too. But she brushed aside the implied compliment. It was out of place here, and now. She was not Ann Sheridan, the star; she was Ann, the girl, the friend of Tess Whitehouse and Gail De Lane.

She said soberly, "I'd hate to have them believe I failed them. They've got enough—without worrying about what happened to me!"

"They won't worry—too much," Crunch assured her. "Unc knows I trailed you. He'll tell Gail." They went around a corner. "And that will hold 'em. You may not know it, but my best friends call me dependable." They moved across the sidewalk, to the curb. Ann had been so deep in her thoughts she had not noticed Crunch's car parked there.

He opened the door. But Ann hesitated, looking backward.

"We have quite a way to go," Crunch said almost gruffly. "We haven't any time to lose."

Ann looked at him, startled.

"I'm talking about the Stop-Off," Crunch told her. "If we're going to be of any help to Lacey De Lane, we'll have to step on it."

"All right," Ann said, "let's go."

She heard the man's quick and appreciative, "Good girl," as she got in the front seat. Crunch came in behind the wheel. He closed the door. There was an air of finality about the slamming sound it made.

Ann thought suddenly, "I wish I hadn't come!" But it was too late now. She was here, in the car. They were going along the street. Other cars passed them. People were in the cars. Ann heard music from a radio.

She wished that she were someplace where there was a flood of music—and laughter and people.

But she had given her consent. She had told Crunch she would go. And now they were going. To the Stop-Off, wherever that might be. It was "quite a way to go," Crunch had said.

No. There was no turning back now.

There was no turning back.

CHAPTER EIGHT

TIME TO TALK

Where they were going, Ann did not know. The streets of Coreyville were strange to her. She knew that Crunch had started in the opposite direction from that which Tess had taken when they had gone to Gail's apartment, and that was all.

Ann's thoughts were alive with questions. She wanted to ask Crunch how far it was to the Stop-Off. What it was. If he had any idea why Lacey would want to go there.

But a grim silence seemed to have gripped the man. Ann stole a glance at his face after they had gone perhaps a mile, and his set expression did not invite conversation. He was bent on making every minute count, thinking ahead to what lay before them.

To what lay before them!

Ann's eyes seemed fixed on the headlight's glare. She knew they had come away from the wider, brighter streets. They were crossing railroad tracks. The rough stone of factory buildings rose bluntly on either side. Ann was not interested, however. She was filled with the questions, and, as though the headlight were a beckoning finger, her gaze was drawn to it. Until she could no longer endure the throbbing silence.

She turned abruptly to look at Crunch.

"What is the Stop-Off?" she asked him.

He said, too loudly, "What?"

"The Stop-Off," Ann sounded a little weak in her own ears. "What is it, Crunch? And where is it?"

"Oh—a kind of a glorified hot-dog stand. It's just over the river, about half a mile the other side of the high bridge."

It meant little to the girl, except that the place was a hot-dog stand. Ann had a sudden and almost uncontrollable desire to laugh, the thing was so out of proportion to the grimness of this ride, of Lacey's hectic and mysterious mission.

She said, quietly enough, "But why would Lacey want to go there?"

"We'll come to that," Crunch said, "presently."

He slowed at the next corner, took a turn to the right. There was a filling station before them and in the light of one of the powerful overhanging signs, Crunch came to a stop. Ann looked about questioningly, and the man said, "This isn't it. We're taking a little time out—to talk things over."

"Talk things over?" Ann repeated, and Crunch nodded. "That's right. It's time to talk. And we've got to talk fast." His left elbow was on the wheel and he was turned, looking directly at her. His hat was back a little on his head. He looked younger somehow, but serious, deadly serious. "You're here to help Lacey, aren't you?" he said bluntly.

"Why—of course!"

"Well, then, suppose you give me your slant on the business?"

Ann shrugged helplessly. "But I don't know, Crunch. I'm all mixed up, myself!"

"You know a heck of a lot more than you've told me!"

"Why—I—," Ann began, and realized that the man told the truth. Of course, she knew more than he did. She knew about the invitations. She had them here, now, in her purse.

Thinking of the red-inked letters, Ann's head bent and her hands seemed to clutch at the clasp of her large bag.

Crunch said, "She's not so far ahead of us, Ann. If we hurry, we can catch up to her. But—minutes count now." His voice roughened. "I happen to be a friend of theirs, too, you know—or I wouldn't be here now."

"I know that!" Ann flashed him a warm, appreciative glance. "I'll tell you all I know." She caught her breath, reaching for words to tell him quickly. It began, she decided, with Gail. With Gail's finding the strange invitations in Lacey's dresser drawer.

Crunch said, "Strange invitations?"

As he repeated it, Ann thought the words far too mild. But she went on, "Yes. Invitations. Gail found them, and put them in her purse. She brought them down to her office—and took them out there. That was how she happened to forget them."

"And she asked you to go and get 'em for her. That right?"

"Yes," Ann nodded.

"You got them?"

"They're here—in my purse." Now, Ann knew, was the time to show them to Crunch. She wondered why she had not done so before, why she had not shared this secret that hung so heavily on her heart. But there had been no time before. Except when Crunch had taken her down town. And then her lips had been sealed. Or she had thought they were.

Now was the time to tell him, and split the burden, share it.

She had taken the crumpled sheets out and had them ready to give to him, when a voice out of nowhere came at her elbow.

" 'Evening. Anything I can—?" The voice broke, became warmer. "Oh, hello, Boyden!"

Crunch said, "Hello, Mike," and both he and Ann were looking at the station attendant. "No, there's nothing—now. We just stopped to read a few letters—from a mutual pal."

The man named Mike waved his hand in a kind of salute and departed.

Crunch, watching him go, said, "That's that."

"I didn't hear him coming," Ann breathed, and looked down at the letters, as Crunch had called them. The attendant had not seen them, for Crunch had managed to push her purse over the pages. Now he was lifting it away, almost grabbing up the things in his eagerness.

He read them all. Ann watched his face as he did so, but it told her little of his reaction. It was when he had finished, and looked directly into her eyes, that she knew he shared her conviction.

Lacey De Lane had become involved in something far beyond her depth, something mysterious and hateful.

Crunch said, "That's about the way I had it figured."

"You mean—you knew about—*this?*"

"No. But I knew Lacey had got herself into trouble." He had the pages one on top of the other. He said, glancing down, "Of all the *bunk—!*"

"Don't you believe—?" Ann began, but Crunch was talking. "Have you read all these things?"

"Not—not all. Just two of them."

"Listen to this." Crunch read, *"You have known*

Ann Watched His Face as He Read

the way that leads to peace. To the beauty of the deep pool. The Mystic Pool. You are bidden." He looked sharply at Ann. "You get that? *You have known the way.* That means she must have been there *before*—get it?"

Ann would have said, "Been *where* before? Do you mean to the Stop-Off?" But Crunch waited for no answer.

"And that rummy-looking thing there. Supposed to be a kind of a sphinx, I'd say."

"That's what we thought, too. It *is* a sphinx, Crunch. If you saw it in a better light, you'd be sure."

"I'm sure enough now."

He was biting his lip, frowning at her, but not seeing her. Ann said, a bit shakily, "Gail's worried sick!"

"I don't blame her." He seemed to wake from a dream of remote places, took one deep breath and thrust the papers into Ann's hands. "Put 'em back in your purse."

"All right." Ann took the letters, not willingly. "Crunch, do you think she's there? At that Stop-Off?"

"No, I don't."

Ann had closed her purse on the red-inked invitations. She said, "Then, where—?"

"Listen," the man cut in. "Tell me in a few words what happened up there, when you were in the shop getting those letters."

"What happened?" Ann repeated, wonderingly.

"This is no time to put on an act," Crunch sounded flat. "I saw you when you came out, you know. Both of you."

"I'm not putting on an act." Ann's cheeks felt warm. "I've told you—."

"Easy." He patted her hand. "I mean, give me the story. We're on the same side—remember?"

Ann put her hand to her head. She felt dizzy. She thought, made herself think, "I'm talking to Crunch now. He's on the same side. We've got to hurry if we're going to help Lacey."

Crunch said again, "Easy, there."

"I'm all right, Crunch." Ann took a deep breath. "I've wanted to tell you all along, honestly. I thought it would help—but I've been so mixed up! It—it wasn't quite the way you thought. I mean about Lacey and Jacky Dahl. Jacky was tied up, her hands and her feet, and she had a handkerchief around her mouth. She bumped into Lacey up there, and then she bumped into a table." The desire to laugh again almost caught up with her, but Ann clenched her fists and went on. "Jacky lost consciousness, and Lacey must have tied her up then. When I went up to Gail's office, I didn't see anyone. It was after I was there I heard her—Lacey.

I hid in Tess's room across the hall and Lacey came in."

"Where you were?" Crunch said sharply.

"Oh, no. She went into Gail's room. She took down two little statues from the wall."

"What under the sun—?"

Ann cut in this time. "She didn't want them. It was *back of them,* on the wall. She pressed her hands there until she found a hidden spring. A little door opened and she took out a kind of sack."

"A sack—?"

"That's what it looked like. Very small, you understand."

Crunch said, grimly, "I think I do." He sat up straighter. "Then Lacey made her getaway. You found Jacky Dahl. And that was that."

Ann said, gratefully, "That's all."

Crunch ran the fingers of his hand up under his hat. He said, under his breath, "It's a nasty mess!"

But Ann was still waiting for what he could tell her.

"Crunch—?"

"Huh?"

"Do you know where Lacey is? Where she went?"

"I think she went to Drew Blender's villa." He muttered something more, but it was lost to Ann. Bending swiftly, he had turned the ignition switch. They were on their way again, but Ann thought she heard him say, "We'll soon find out."

Ann was by no means satisfied. She had taken Crunch into her confidence, had done her share of the talking, but he had left her with the whirl of pounding questions.

First, it was the Stop-Off. That was where Lacey had wanted to go. That was a kind of hot dog stand. But Crunch did not think she went there. She went to some villa. Where was this villa? Why did Crunch think Lacey went there?

She was going to demand an explanation in full, but then they came to what Ann knew must be the high bridge. The road to it led up steeply. Wooden planks were under them, boards that creaked. The way was so narrow, it seemed no vehicle could pass them, and yet Ann saw the lights of an advancing car. Not only the headlights, but the smaller bright spot, higher, that said as clearly as though Crunch had spoken the word:

Taxicab.

Lacey had taken a cab. She had gone this way. And now the cab was coming back again.

She heard Crunch then. He said, "We're on the right trail!" and slowed the car to a crawl while the other moved on past them. Ann was conscious of the beating throb of the motor, of the lights that twinkled here and there on the massive lacework of the bridge. There was a long line of light on the river far below her, too, and smaller lights that showed the water rippling. It looked deep and dark and very cold.

Crunch was at her side, and yet she had a feeling of being dreadfully alone, of not belonging.

"This isn't really happening," her thoughts ran helplessly. "Things like this don't happen. Not to people like me."

The man said suddenly, "Now, I'll give you the setup," and it was like a dash of icy water. Things like this did happen. They were happening, and Ann was caught up in the mad whirl, powerless to exert her own will. She was trapped. Trapped by the darkness. Trapped by fear.

She heard herself saying, "Where are we going, Crunch?"

"We're going to stop in a little while, ahead at the spring. I'll tell you then."

They came down the other incline at the end of the bridge, back to the solid road. Ann sat rigidly, watching the headlights, and waiting.

When they had nearly passed the low, dark building nestled at the side of the road, Ann caught the words printed over the door. She cried, "That was the Stop-Off, Crunch!"

"I know it," he said. "But we're going to the spring first. I'll leave the car there."

There was no one on the road except themselves.

In the dim places, to the right and left, Ann could see the stony rises of ground. How high the hills went up on either side, she could not tell, but she had a sensation of being swallowed up in the night.

At length Crunch took a left turn, into a curved road that went back some way from the main highway. Ann caught a glimpse of a rounded stone structure, and guessed this must be the spring. But they went past it, farther into the depths of the hills, and presently they stopped. Crunch said, in the silence that pressed on them, "Here we are." He turned off the lights, and it seemed they were in complete darkness. Ann could not see his face, but she knew he was looking toward her. "What kind of a hiker are you?" he asked.

"Fair," Ann said. "Are we going to hike?" She thought to herself, "This is the beginning of the worst part of it. Something horrible is going to happen. And I have to face it. I have to go through with it. And the sooner we start, the sooner we'll be done."

That was the way to look at it. Get it over. Get it done. If we have to walk somewhere, let's start out and walk. Not just sit here and think.

Crunch had no intention of wasting time in idle thought. Ann heard him rummaging in a side pocket. He explained, "My flash. But I don't want to use it unless I have to."

Ann said, "All right. Suppose you throw a little light on the situation."

She heard him give a low chuckle of approval. "Good girl," he said softly. "I was afraid you'd go hysterical on me."

"I'm about ready to!" Ann thought, but she said, "First it was the Stop-Off, then it was somebody's villa, and now it's the spring. Where does Lacey De Lane come in?"

"I'll be brief," Crunch promised. "The Stop-Off is as far as Lacey could take a cab. She was heading for Blender's Villa. That's where we're going, but we'll leave the car here."

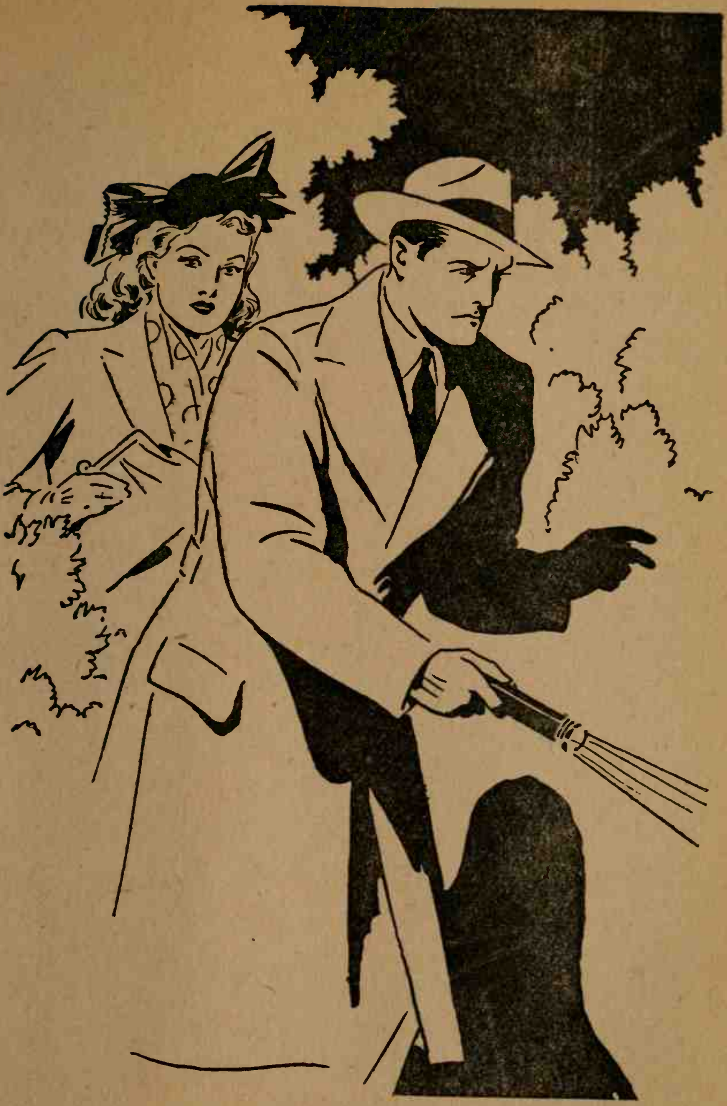
"Oh—?" Ann said, encouraging more.

Crunch talked swiftly. "It's got to be the villa. You remember those messages? They all pounded on the same idea, about the deep pool. That says it as far as I'm concerned."

"Is there a pool there?"

"There was. Drew Blender was a little guy with big ideas. He started to build this villa as he called it about eight—ten years ago. It was never finished. Blender disappeared. People talked about it for a while. Called it Blender's Blunder. Then they forgot it. Other things more important have come up. A half done summer hotel isn't news."

"Oh," Ann said. "A hotel."



Crunch Had No Intention of Wasting Time

"Something like that. I was in it once, a long time ago." Ann knew he was looking away from her. "It must be that," he muttered. "But I don't think Blender's mixed up in it."

Ann's eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness. There were only a few stars, but behind the clouds was a silvery-gray sky. A frail glow showed Crunch seated at her side, showed the hills rising around them.

"Can you see well enough now to start out?" he asked her.

"Why, yes. I think so. How far is it, Crunch?"

"About a mile. But it's going to be rough going. I don't want to use the flash unless it's absolutely necessary."

Ann said suddenly, "Lacey had a flashlight."

"She did, huh?" He pounced on that information. "Well, maybe we'll get a glimpse of her once we get to the top of the hill. If we do—we can be dead sure."

Dead sure. Ann did not like the sound of it. And yet they were trying to follow Lacey De Lane. Trying to find where she had gone.

Crunch thought she had gone to Blender's Villa because it had a pool in it. But the place was only half finished. The Stop-Off was as far as Lacey could take a cab. Because the road to the villa would mean "rough going."

Ann was putting it down carefully in her mind, trying to make sense of the completed picture. But it did not make sense.

"Crunch," Ann said suddenly, "this is March. It's cold. You say this place is only half finished—."

"And wouldn't that be the perfect spot for some underhanded gang to pull their little stunts?"

Ann took her breath in sharply. It was true. Absolutely true. And that was what she had thought when she had first seen the strange invitations, the sign of the sphinx. This was the work of some secret organization.

She felt Crunch's hand on her arm. "All set?" he said. "It doesn't seem so dark now, does it?"

"No," Ann said, and shivered. But it was so. She could see well enough to step from the car, to walk with him along the road. He kept his hand on her arm and they moved faster than Ann had thought would be possible.

"We'll go back to the Stop-Off, and then take the path from there. That's all it is, a path. If it looks safe, I'll use the flash for footprints. We can see if Lacey went on ahead."

Both Ann's hands were around her purse. Her eyes were glued to the road underfoot. The ground had a hard crust. She heard Crunch say, "Are you cold?"

"N-no. Not as cold as I was."

"The wind doesn't get at us here."

They walked on, coming to the stones that were built up around the spring. In summer with trees and foliage around it, the place would probably be a small oasis. Now it was anything but that. Ann thought she saw a dark shadowy form moving behind, and wanted to take her eyes away. She could not and kept staring backward as they walked along.

Crunch said, "See something?"

"I thought so. Back of—the spring."

They paused, waiting, listening. "It's a tree," Crunch said. "There's nothing there." But he had lowered his voice even as Ann had done. They must talk in whispers now.

Ann thought she heard other voices whispering around them, murmurings in the branches of the trees, among the jutting rocks on either side of the road. Once, high overhead, there came a scraping sound, as though a loose branch had snapped and was tossed against the bare tree trunk.

Crunch seemed unaware of the muted commotion of the sleeping world. He plodded on, keeping his hand on her arm. But never once loosened the tense grip.

Once, after they were on the main road, he asked her, "Got the right kind of shoes?"

They were not. Walking under these present conditions called for boots. But Ann made no complaint. She said, "They'll do." She thought to herself, "They'll have to do." And again there came the sensation that she moved helplessly in a bad dream. Her feet moved along obediently. Her hands were both holding her purse. Her eyes were ahead, down on the dull gray that was the road. She felt numb and listless, but with a sense of the trial that was to come. They were like soldiers, marching grimly to the line of battle. This was no time to think. This was the time to plod on, plod, plod. The time for action would come. They were moving nearer and nearer every minute.

They still had the road to themselves. When they came within sight of the Stop-Off, there was no sign of life around the place. Back of it, great ghostly trees raised against the misty glow of the blue-gray night. Ann looked upward. A swirl of clouds rolled, parted suddenly. She saw a more silvery gleam, the light of the moon. It was gone almost as quickly as she had noticed it, but Ann felt comforted. The moon was there, the same moon she had seen so many other nights, when things were right, when she was a real person, not some dark shadow, groping along a strange rock-bound way.

She almost started when Crunch said, "Ann—?"

"Yes?" It was little more than a breath.

"We won't stop here at all. It looks deserted."

Ann said again, "Yes."

"Can we go a little faster?"

"Oh—sure. And you don't need to hold my arm, Crunch. I can see well enough. Maybe—maybe we could go faster, if we went separately."

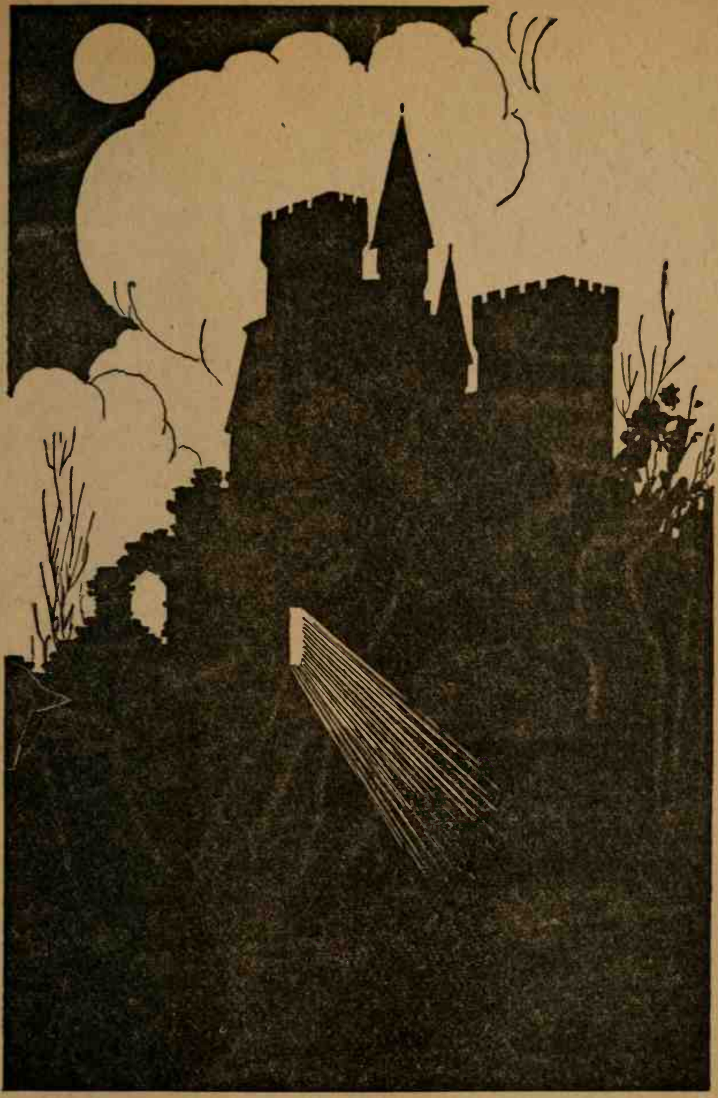
"It's a thought." He dropped his arm. "Now, when we get there, to the side door, there's a path that leads back into the woods. At least that's all there used to be, a kind of a pathway. We turn there."

Ann said, "All right, Crunch."

They came close to the building. Ann saw the windows like dark eyes glowering at them. She saw the steps leading up to a door. They were stone steps, broken here and there. Jagged peaks showed not only in the steps but in the low wall on either side of them. Resolutely, Ann turned her face away. She felt a surge of relief that they need not go into this deserted place.

The time was to come when the low, empty building would seem almost inviting. What lay ahead was so much more bleak, so deathly forbidding. But as yet Ann had no idea of what Blender's unfinished villa was like. If she had formed a mental picture, it was the word "hotel" that conjured up a habitable place.

Crunch knew what it was like. Ann could only wait for enlightenment. She held herself in a kind of quiet suspense and they came to the place where the by-road branched away and into the maze of



The Windows Glowered at Them

twisting tree trunks.

"Here's the path," Crunch said.

"It's pretty wide," Ann commented.

"Yeah. Wider than I remembered, but it's been a long time." Ann saw the white blur of his face as he lifted his head and peered along the trail ahead. It seemed to rise, to be lifted up to some place in the overhanging sky and the squirming twigs that tangled, complainingly.

Crunch observed, "Wind's rising again. Feels like snow."

Ann said, "Oh, does it matter?"

"You're not getting jittery on me?"

The girl's eyes moved backward, over her shoulder. "I'm not exactly having fun," she said. Crunch grunted, and she heard him fumbling with something in his hands. She soon found it was the flash. He said, "In my opinion, you've been a brick to date. Just the partner I'd pick to go hunting a sphinx on a cold March night."

"Oh, Crunch!" Ann let out her exasperation, her impatience. But she was jarred a little from the grip of terror. Which was probably what the man wanted.

He said, in a businesslike way, "You keep looking around. I'm going to take a look at this path." Ann wanted to say, "It's bigger than a path. It's really a road!" But that was silly, pointless. So she stood obediently, studying the main highway, for what she was not certain. Lights, perhaps. The warning that a car might be coming from either direction. But she was well aware of Crunch bending down, opening his coat to hide the flash while he trained the beam close to the rough earth.

It lasted only a minute. He stood grunting and Ann said, "Find any footprints? The ground's about frozen, isn't it?"

"Yeh. But they're there. All shapes and sizes." He took her arm again and they started along the upward way into the trees.

Ann said, "This is quite a hill. Didn't you say we could see—from the top of it?"

"I think so. If I remember it, there's this hill, then a kind of a deep gully."

"Gully!"

"Well, valley, then." He sounded cross, as though words mattered little. As though in being snappish he were hiding his real emotion.

Fear. Ann knew in that moment that Crunch was by no means minimizing the danger ahead. She was right. But it was fear for her that held him.

He kept her arm. "Ann," he said gruffly, "I think we've got a job to do. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I ought to leave you back there—in my car."

"Leave me back there!" Ann kept her voice down as he had done, but there was no mistaking her rebellion to the idea. "I should say not! I'm in this, too, Charles Boyden. What do you think I am?"

He was grinning again, Ann knew. He said, "To be blunt, I think you're rather swell. Come on, let's go."

It was when they came to the top of the rise of ground that Ann knew what he meant by a gully ahead. The ground dropped off too sharply to lead merely into a valley, though the decline was both wide and long. The earth seemed to be suddenly scooped out by a giant hand. Directly ahead was a blank nothingness. The trees were obscured. Farther on, where the earth rose, were the trees. They seemed far away against the backdrop of the sky.

Ann caught her breath sharply. Crunch said something that sounded like, "You hurt?" She brushed that aside.

"I was thinking of Lacey, Crunch. How do you think she could come here—*alone?*"

"If there was—," Crunch began, and broke off. His fingers cut through the cloth of her sleeve. "Look—!" he said hoarsely. *"Did you see that?"*

Even as the man had seen it, so had Ann. It was like the brief, steady glow of a firefly, far ahead, at the place where the trees could be seen. It lasted only a moment, and they did not see it again, though they stood like two of the trees behind them, that quiet, that still.

"Lacey's flashlight," Crunch said. "And now I know I was right about the path. After we reach that hill over there, that's all there is—a path through the trees. It goes down. There's another drop and that's where we can see the villa. Half-built, you get it? Not finished on top of the hill the way the little guy had planned."

As he talked, he was walking forward. Ann scarcely heard him. She was thinking of Lacey, plodding ahead through the desolate trees, through the silence that was thicker than sound.

If Lacey could do it, so could they, Ann thought. She said aloud, "Oh, Crunch, it must have seemed dreadfully important to her—!"

Crunch growled, "They've got a hold on her all right. Well, we'll soon find out."

CHAPTER NINE

BLENDER'S VILLA

Ann could not have told how long it took them to walk from that first rise of ground to the second hill that marked the semicircle of the deep valley. It might have been thirty minutes, it might have been closer to an hour. The going seemed slower because they had to move cautiously, not only to avoid the ruts in the path, but to guard against making any sound.

For, as Crunch pointed out, Lacey was by no means the only one who had traveled this way. Others had come before her. And still more might be coming later.

It was the thought of the others who might be following them that turned Ann's muscles to strings of wire. It seemed she was a kind of mechanical doll. Without her wish, the wires were being pulled. She followed along. But her eyes, every now and then, would stray backward over the way they had come. Once she was positive she heard the sound of stumbling feet behind them.

"Wait—!" She grabbed for Crunch's arm, held it frantically.

"Turn your ankle?" he asked.

"No. I thought I heard someone—coming behind us. Listen!"

If there had been a footfall, it was not repeated. There was only the wind in the trees, faintly swishing the branches. From far away a dog howled, and close on this came the mournful wail of a passing train.

Crunch said, "Across the river. That must be the ten-ten."

"Oh! Is it that late?"

"Must be." They stood motionless. Once again the train gave its long-drawn sigh. It was soon lost in the night and Crunch somewhat briskly said, "Well—that's that. Let's get on. I think you imagined hearing someone coming."

Ann kept back the sigh that rose in her throat. "I must have," she admitted, and they were on their way again.

And at length they were out of the deep valley and up on the second hill. That height had seemed like a goal. Once that had been reached, Ann thought, they would be able to see the villa. She would know then, really know what it looked like.

Disappointment met her. There was no high wall rising among the rocky mounds. If anything, the night seemed darker. The clouds, perversely, had thickened, covered over the smattering of silver that was the moon. Peering into the dark, deep quiet, Ann could scarcely make out the tree trunks.

Crunch growled softly under his breath.

Ann said, "What is it?"

"I can't remember which way we turn. Or if we turn."

"We're still on the path," Ann said dubiously, because she had wondered if they actually were. Perhaps they were merely wandering in and out among the trees. "You can't use the flash now."

"No, that's out. Well," he took her hand this time, "let's struggle on. Maybe we'll catch a flicker of light ahead."

It was soon after that that Ann felt the sharp slap across her face, and in her surprise and the pain of it, she almost cried out. Crunch was quick to catch her muffled gasp.

"A branch," Ann said. "It scratched my face."

"Hurt—?"

"N-No." But it did. It felt like a burn.

Thereafter Ann kept her hand up to her face. Her purse was in that hand, too, and provided a shield. Her other hand was in the man's. He was holding her fingers too tightly, but Ann rather welcomed the firm grip. She thought again of Lacey. How could Lacey have come this way—alone?

Crunch was the first to see that they had come to the end of their pilgrimage. He halted so abruptly

Ann thought that it was he who had suffered some hurt.

"We're there, Ann!" he whispered, quieting her question. "There it is—over there to the right. See it?"

She saw it, the thing that was meant to be a hotel, but which had become instead "Blender's Blunder." It was little more to her than a heap of stone that rose higher on one side and sloped to the ground in an uneven tumble. Because of its half-finished state, the building did not come over the crest of the hill. It had probably been blueprinted to tower over the hills, dominate the countryside. But such was far from the case now.

Ann said, haltingly, "It looks like an old, old castle. One that had fallen into ruin."

"Ruin is right," Crunch agreed. "If we could see, it'd be so much worse."

Ann thought foolishly, "It'd be so much *better.*"

Not being able to see, to have to constantly strain her eyes, was taking its toll. She was tense to the snapping point. Her eyes burned in her head and there was a dull throbbing in her throat that rose chokingly.

She heard Crunch saying, "The underground part was completed. Seems to me the pool was about in the middle. Took in some of the first floor and the basement."

Quotations from the strange letters flashed like fire in Ann's mind. *The deep, deep pool. The mystic pool.*

She said, simply to be saying something, "Not all of the basement?"

"Heck, no. The dining rooms were supposed to be all around, in the sunken part around the pool. Then there was some of the third floor finished. You could go up on a kind of balcony and look down."

"Into the pool?"

"That's right." She wondered why they were simply standing there, why Crunch let the anxious minutes crawl by. He soon told her.

"I've forgotten where those steps led down. I know it was at the back, or was it around the side?" He gave a rueful grunt. "About now I'm not sure which is the back of the place."

"It's hard to tell," Ann said faintly. "It's such a wreck."

Crunch drew a deep breath. "Well," he had her hand again, "we'll circle around this way, to the right. Slow, now, we don't want to make a sound."

No, they must make no sound, and moving over the frozen clods of earth, they groped their way toward the mass of stone. Ann was trying to catch some sign of life around the place, and she knew Crunch was, too. She thought, "I can almost feel us listening."

But first their eyes were rewarded. There was a gleam of light ahead, faint and thin and, it seemed, far away. From where they were, it looked as though the beam were running out over the earth. Ann guessed that it came from one of the basement windows, a window that had been darkened to conceal all light, but which had partially failed at this.

She was right.

Crunch said, and had difficulty keeping his voice down for the hope that leaped in it, "There's a light in one of those basement windows! We're on the trail, Ann. And it's hot!"

"But I'm so cold!" Ann thought miserably. "I'm frozen. I can't go another step! I can't!"

But they moved onward, Crunch clinging to her hand. They moved ever downward, guided by that string of light. Ann let her gaze move up when they were forced to pause, to step cautiously around a boulder or a twisted tree trunk, and then she could see the top of the unfinished villa against the sky. Like the shell of a house it looked, a black shell.

"Crunch—?"

"Huh?"

"How could this place ever be used as a hotel? How could people get to it?"

"From the river. It runs around, down there, off to the left. You can't see from here. There's a path down there, too. A road, rather."

Ann said, "Oh," shortly, and knew that the same thought came to Crunch. They would do well to keep part of their caution for that other river road. And the river itself. Someone might be coming from that direction.

At length they came close enough to see that the light was a horizontal line. They could make out the window from which it came. It was below the level of the ground, coming from a sunken place.

"It's one of those basement windows all right," Crunch said, and it sounded as though he chuckled. He was further pleased to see the steps as he had remembered them. "Over there, Ann, to the right of that window, get it?"

To Ann, it looked like a deep gash in the rocky way, a circular trench. "Is that—are they the back steps?" she whispered.

"Yeah. They go down to the dining room entrance. To a long hall, I think, and the dining rooms are off of that, and the entrance to the pool." He was remembering out loud, excitement in his low whisper, and Ann turned suddenly from ice to fire. Crunch had come to the edge of the drop that encircled the sunken window. More light was coming out now. If they crawled, or jumped down, they could look through the opening in what appeared to be a rough, heavy curtain. They could actually look into one of the dining rooms. And maybe they could see Lacey De Lane!

Crunch made the leap first, landing lightly enough, but before he held up his hand to Ann to help her down, he waited, making certain the slight noise he made had gone unnoticed.

Stillness blanketed the night. There was nothing but the whispering small voices of the bleak, unawakened trees. The moon kept hidden. When Crunch put up his hand to her, Ann did not see it at first. Then he motioned, nearer to where the ray of light poured out, and Ann took his fingers. They were firm and cool.

She felt herself leaping down to him, farther than she had thought. Her slippers struck a staccato note on hard stone.

Crunch said, "Good girl."

"I made so much noise!"

"No, you didn't. Quiet, now." He went down on his knees and moved nearer to the opening in the curtain. "Come on," Ann heard him whisper and she knelt beside him.

Even as the word *hotel* had proved a far cry from what remained of the uncompleted villa, so the word *dining room* was vastly out of place.

Ann told herself, "I might have known. It isn't finished. And it's been standing idle for years. What else could anyone expect?"

She could see down into a large room, an immense room. Or could it be called a room? It was more like looking into a vast cave. What showed of the walls seemed nothing more than the solid earth. The floor, too, was earthen, but hard-packed, as though many feet had trampled it down.

Where the light was coming from, Ann could not be sure. It was an uncertain light that flickered. Not a flashlight. A candle, perhaps. More than one candle.

Crunch reached over and touched her hand.

"See anything?"

"Nothing much. It looks like a big cellar."

"Come over this way," he urged her closer to the left, to his side. "Now, look down there, way in the back."

With her head almost to her knees, Ann bent over and peered into the opening. She could see one of the walls plainly, and the rude bench that ran along it, close to the floor. That was all there was, just this board over a couple of stumps, or what looked like stumps. There was no life in the room, and no moving figures. No sign of Lacey De Lane.

But the light was there, Ann thought swiftly, and maybe someone would come. Maybe someone was in there now, but out of their line of vision. She wished she could reach in and push the curtain aside.

Crunch had the same thought. "There's no

window on this—no glass. But the iron grating—get that? The sack's hung so far back I can't get at it."

"Sack—?" Ann whispered.

"That's what it looks like, burlap. They got it strung across too far to reach."

For a time they kept silent, watching, waiting. The stone under her knees was biting sharp. Ann shifted her weight and felt the circle, tight and cutting, around her kneecap. She thought, "I've torn my stocking!" The fingers of one hand investigated and she felt the round gap, a big one.

Almost in the instant, her thoughts marched back in line. What did a torn stocking matter—now? The thing was to find Lacey De Lane.

She was not down there, in that cave-room with the long bench, but Ann felt strangely certain that Lacey was not far away. She straightened her back, bent again, waiting.

Crunch said, "Uncomfortable?"

"Oh, no."

"Maybe we ought to try the steps. No one seems to be here."

He moved as though he were going to stand, but Ann held him back.

"Wait, Crunch. I've got a hunch she'll come."

He did not say, "Lacey?" He knew she meant Lacey. That was all either of them thought of in that moment.

Ann became aware of movements in the cellar room, and thought of the others, whoever and whatever they were, who had been the cause of Lacey's coming here. The flickering light seemed suddenly to lower itself, and then to move. It was as though a candle had been taken down, and was being carried nearer.

Ann saw the candle, tall and slender, and the hand that held it. A wide, flowing sleeve hung from the wrist. The hand came nearer to the bench, and then the whole figure was in view. Ann gasped when she saw it, not sure whether it was a man or a woman in the white draperies. It seemed to be a single garment, high at the neck, reaching down to the dirt floor. As the wearer walked along slowly, his feet pushed against the hem. It was soiled, badly, around the hem. Some kind of a long green sash was around the waist, and on the head of the person was a high hat-like affair, also of green. A white veil came down on either side of it, and was draped around the chin.

The figure reached the bench and stopped there, but presently turned sidewise. As though Ann and Crunch had somehow made their presence felt, the face came directly toward the window where they were crouching, tense, scarcely breathing.

Ann saw the emblem, high on the headdress. It was painted, or carved, she did not know which, but beyond a doubt it was another replica of the red-inked sphinx that appeared on the mysterious invitations.

Even as Ann made this discovery, another crowded on its heels. Time turned backward for one brightly clarifying instant. Ann was back in the WHITEHOUSE. She was standing behind the door of Tess's office, peering across the hall into Gail's room. The woman who had taken down the figures was standing there at Gail's door, giving that last, forlorn look about the room. That had been Lacey De Lane. And so was this.

The figure in the white robes was Lacey De Lane.

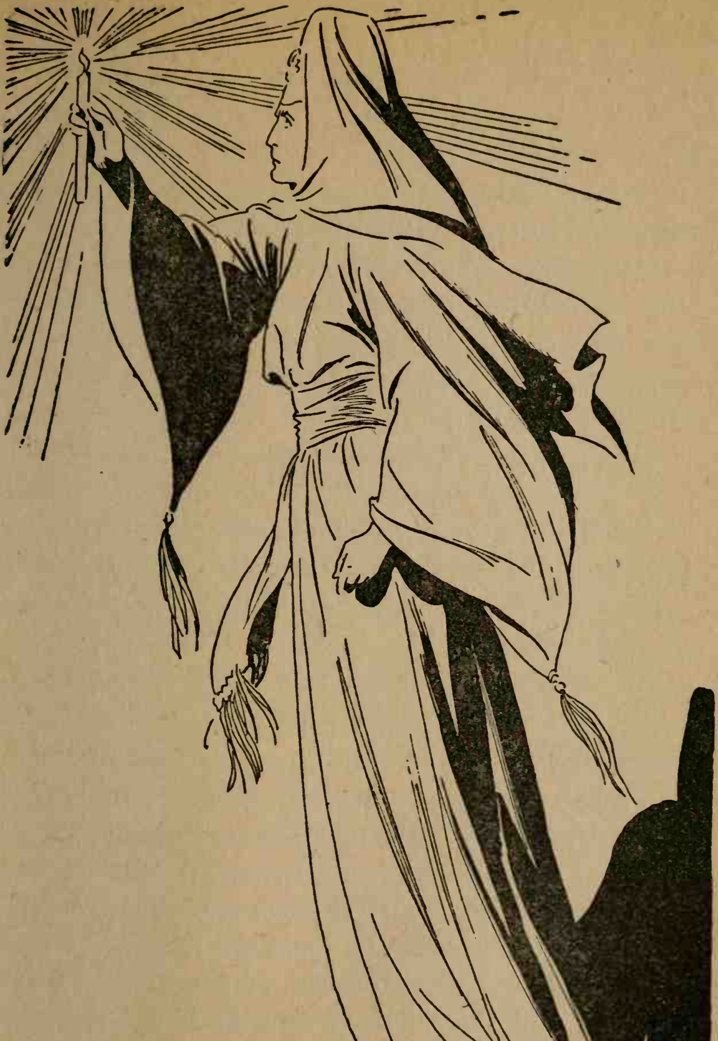
Crunch recognized her, too. It was he who breathed her name.

"Ann! It's—Lacey! What a get-up!"

Ann whispered, agonizingly, "Be quiet, Crunch!"

It seemed the woman was looking directly into her eyes. But that was impossible. Lacey could not see them out here. She could not look through the slit in the coarse curtain.

No. Lacey De Lane did not see them. She did not see anything. Her eyes were curiously blank, staring ahead, but seeing nothing, or seeing something far, far removed from Ann Sheridan and Charles Boyden. She seemed scarcely aware of the candle in her hand, the danger of the flame. Ann wanted to call out to her, to warn her, "Lacey, hold that candle away from you!"



The Figure in White Robes

She felt Crunch's hand on her arm.

"Oh, what shall we do?" she murmured frantically. "We can't—!"

"We'll wait here—for a little while. Listen—!" He held her tighter. "Someone's coming. Hear that?"

Ann heard it, a throbbing beat that was at first a monotonous note but in which were soon blended more sounds, a wailing of strings. What kind of instrument it might be, Ann could not say. It seemed savage, unearthly.

She looked quickly at Lacey's face. The woman had turned and was looking away, to the left. Her shoulders under the white robe rose and fell helplessly. Lacey was not taken by surprise. She had heard this weird music before. She seemed only desperately weary.

Ann thought suddenly, "Lacey's got her coat on under that white robe. But still she looks cold. She looks frozen."

The ghostly music ceased as abruptly as it had begun. And as quiet came again, the light flickered in the cellar room. It was not the candle in Lacey's hand. She was standing like some waxen image; even the veil about her head and throat was still. The moving gleam, Ann thought, must be from a door. That was it. A door had opened, letting in the wailing notes, and had closed. Someone with another candle was coming in.

Before she could see who it was, Ann heard the voice. It was low, flat, expressionless.

"You are at peace."

Ann sensed that Crunch looked at her quickly, but she could not turn to him, not then. She kept her eyes on that slit in the curtain, waiting for the owner of the voice to appear.

On the outer fringe of her vision she was aware of Lacey. The woman had seated herself on the bench. The white draperies were spread out over the blackness of the floor. The candle was held in both her hands.

The voice said again, "You are at peace." And like a tall majestic ghost the figure seemed to slowly skim over the earthen surface. It was white, the robe, like Lacey's, but the sash and headdress were of a deep purple. Even so, the red sphinx showed clearly. The lighted candle showed the face, too, slanting eyes under heavy, black brows that went up to thin points. A long nose. A red gash of a mouth.

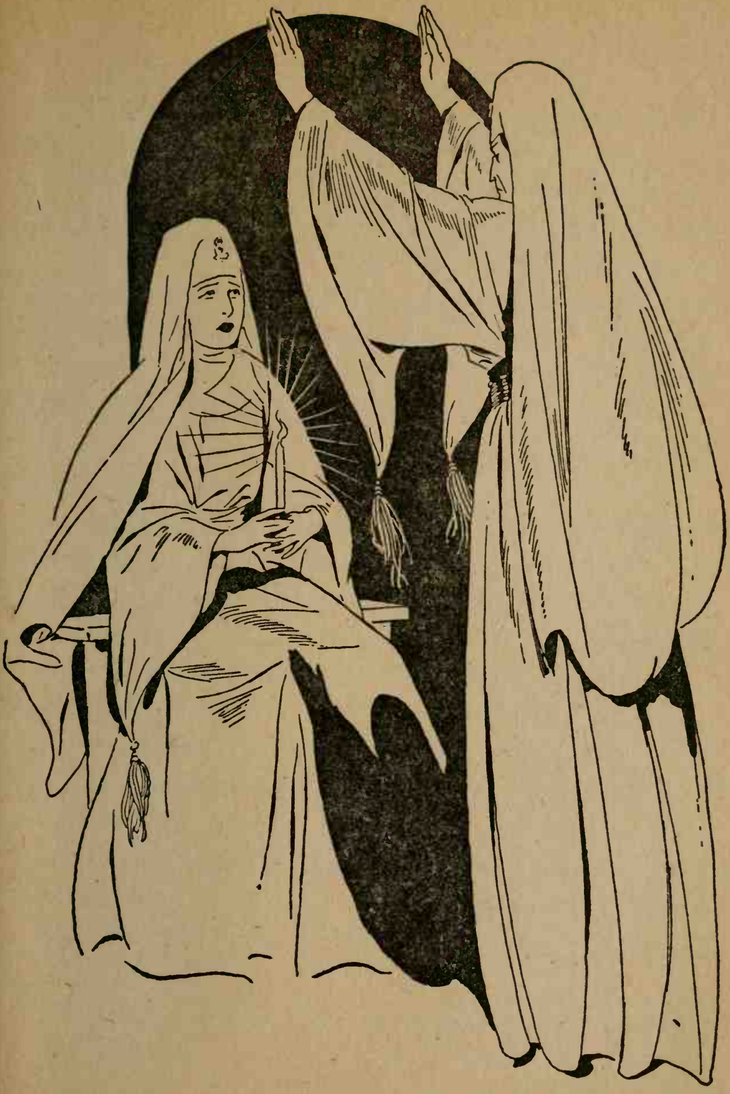
Ann thought swiftly, "A horrible make-up job," and the thought somehow seemed to bring life to her veins. It was as though she had been watching a real-life tragedy, seeing the pain and sorrow of a fellow being. And then finding it was only a play after all, a bad play.

It was not the first time in this long, mad, seemingly endless day that Ann had been confronted by strange costumes. There had been the time earlier in the evening, when she had seen Rof Hunt in a kind of dress rehearsal. But that had been different. Rof's had been a careful costume, correct, the real thing. This was strictly amateur.

She heard Crunch mutter, "Of all the corny—!" He broke off but Ann clung to that word. It said exactly what she had been thinking. The candles, the costumes that went on over street dress and coats, was the quick hocus-pocus of cheap conspirators.

But still they had woven their spell. Still Lacey De Lane had been gripped in the mystic mood they had created.

Ann did not know what lay behind the flimsy trappings, but it was something that had brought Lacey into their hands. Something that had made Lacey first of all go to the bank. "Her money and her jewels," Ann's thought danced, and she wondered why she had not known at once that Gail's jewels were in that little sack. Perhaps she *had* known it all along, but disliked the idea so much she had not accepted it. She accepted it now, all of it. The foolish tall figure in white. She believed it was a woman. The hands looked like a woman's hands. She saw the one holding the candle, the other beckon with a wide, sweeping gesture. The palm was up, waiting for Lacey to speak.



What Lay Behind the Flimsy Trappings?

Lacey said nothing. She simply looked up into the slanting eyes. Dully, slowly, she shook her head.

It was that last pathetic gesture that blew away the shreds of fear from Ann's thoughts. She felt a raging, wild anger of which she had not suspected herself capable.

The woman's hand went up, high over her head. She said, "Come. Perhaps we may find what we seek."

And Lacey, hesitantly, came to her feet, her eyes on the purple headdress.

Ann was on her feet. She felt the prickling that raced to her ankles, the cramp in her knees and back from kneeling there on the cold stone, but she gave herself little concern. She said to Crunch, "I've seen enough!"

He was standing beside her. "Me, too."

Placing his hands on the rim of the hollowed place, he leaped up. Ann felt his hand reaching down and took it. Her foot found a ledge and she stepped up.

Without a word, they started in the direction of the sunken steps.

CHAPTER TEN

UNDER A SPELL

"I wish we could turn on the flash—just once!" Crunch said under his breath.

"No!" Ann held him back, put her hand over his. "We don't dare to risk it!"

The man looked swiftly about. "Guess not," he agreed.

They had come to the foot of the stone steps. As Ann had thought, they followed a trench-like winding way down to the door. Now they were right before the door, but could scarcely see it. Ann was torn with a desire to hurry inside, and to hurry away or to find some other entrance. For, if the door should suddenly open, it would mean discovery. There was no place to hide. The sunken steps were too narrow, the walls on either side too steep.

Crunch had his hand against the door. Perhaps he had found some kind of a knob, or latch. He said quietly, "All right, let's go," and pushed against the wood.

Ann heard the door moving inward, though it made little sound. She felt Crunch's hand on her arm pulling her to him, and she stepped into a pit of absolute black. The door closed behind them and they stood there. Ann could hear Crunch's breathing, deep and fast. Or was it the beating of her own heart?

A moment passed, another. A close, damp odor seemed to grow, gripping her throat. And then something brushed against the side of her face. Ann's hand flew upward. She did not cry out, but the sound of her own startled gasp seemed to fill the darkness.

Crunch whispered, "What's the matter?"

"S-Something touched my face."

She heard the man moving, felt his hand reaching to her head. He explored the area about her, and evidently came to a wall.

He said, close to her ear, "I can't make out anything. You're not hurt?"

"Oh, no." Ann swallowed. "I'm—fine."

"Attagirl." There was a brief pause. "We better start on. If only I dared to—." He stopped, flinging out his arm. It caught Ann over the shoulders, thrusting her back against the wall. *"Look! Over there!"*

Far ahead, she caught the gleam of a dancing light. It showed a wide square arch. That was the end of this corridor in which they stood. At right angles with the arch was another passage. It was along this the light came.

Ann guessed that the passage led to the room they had seen, the cellar-place where Lacey had been. If Lacey had not left right away, if she had hesitated, then it might be she. Perhaps they could signal to her. Perhaps they could dash to her side, take her back along this corridor, out into the open air!

But it was not Lacey. It was the taller robed figure, the woman with the purple headdress. She held the candle as she had done before and its light seemed dazzling, even at this distance. Instinctively, Crunch pushed Ann farther back. There was a thick pillar near them. Behind that, even if the woman turned, they would not likely be seen.

A shred of cloth hung from a nail on the pillar. Ann noted this briefly. She thought, "That's what I felt on my face!" It was not much, but it was better than an unseen hand, a ghostly presence.

Ann's mouth grew into a firm line. "I won't let this make-believe mystery stuff get me!" she told herself resolutely. "There's nothing ghostly about all this. That woman was a real flesh and blood person. She's probably one of the gang that operates here. They're cheap, and shabby—but they're very real!"

And then the music started again. The woman with the purple headdress seemed to glide out of their sight on the waves of the weird, twanging singsong. For now there were voices blending with the strings. They seemed to be one voice, carrying over and over the same scrap of melody. It was as though lips were opened, but were not moving. As though hearts in torment voiced one long and tremulous "Ahh!" that rose and fell, rose and fell.

The shell Ann had built up for herself, the belief that this was a trashy magician's act, collapsed about her trembling shoulders. The weight of fear was pressing down on her again. Now that the purple headdress, the trailing robe had vanished, they were again in complete darkness. There was only the muted melody, the twanging strings.

"All right, let's go." Crunch had a hold on her sleeve.

"Wh-where?"

"Where that candle went. We'll have to follow it. Our only chance."

"But—." It was scarcely a spoken word. Ann knew they must follow the woman with the purple headdress.

They were moving on toward the passage where the light had shone. Ann held her free hand, with the purse, up before her face. Her other hand was in Crunch's fingers. Ann felt the rough planks under her feet and prayed that her heels might not catch, that she might not fall. Once she had lost her balance. But Crunch was there, tightening his grip. She recovered quickly, and they came to the passage.

Ann glanced toward the room from which Lacey had come. All was darkness there. And it seemed that darkness was their only reward in the opposite direction, where the lights had gone. But the voices still came, more softly.

Crunch said, "I'm going to risk it. I think there's a door there."

Before Ann could plead against his lighting the flash, its beam shot forward. There was a door there. High and narrow and rounded at the top. Crunch said, "Humm," with satisfaction, and snapped out the light.

Ann caught his hand as he would have gone on through.

"Wait, Crunch! They just went in—*she* just went in!"

"It's okay. I've got my bearings now. There's a flock of passages in there—."

"I thought you said it was—dining rooms?"

Ann sensed that he shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "That's what they would be, if this barn were finished. The way I remember, it looked like catacombs."

"Catacombs—?"

"Sure. Underground tombs. Just about that cheerful. You want to wait here and let me go on ahead?"

"Let you go on ahead? I should say not!" Ann's fists were clenched, even the hand around her purse.

"Then don't argue. Gives the impression you're afraid of something."

Ann wished she could see his face. Did he actually believe that she wanted to back out? And then she heard him take a deep breath and she knew. This was Crunch's method of applied psychology. He was deliberately trying to make her angry—to keep up her fighting spirit.

"Well," Ann thought, "he needn't bother!" She said in a whisper, "Maybe I am afraid! I won't say I'm not, but if you think for one minute I'm not going to see this thing to a finish—well, you're badly mistaken, Charles Boyden. It's only—"

"Only what?"

"I don't see why we should hurry in and run the risk of being seen. Why not give her a chance to get out of sight?"

"All right. I told you about the cata—about the winding passages. I know where to hide."

"Then let's go." Ann gave him a push.

"You're sure you won't weaken?"

She pushed him again, not gently. "Oh—go!"

Crunch pushed against the door and they went through the opening. He must have closed the door behind them. Ann did not turn around; she was busy taking score of the light that came filtering from two directions. Somehow, she had not expected to find any light. She had thought the woman with the candle, Lacey, too, had passed out of their sight. That there would be no one about—now.

There was no one, no one they could see, but far down to the right and again to the left, the soft glow was enough to show the underground passageways. As Ann recalled pictures of catacombs, they had looked like this. But there were no carvings on these walls, no ornamentations. Here and there stood heavy, square pillars. Blocks of wood, no doubt. The foundation of the villa.

The music had continued to this time, but abruptly it ceased. Ann half expected the two lights to be extinguished, but they were not. She turned to Crunch to see that he was watching her intently.

She said, almost primly, "Well—?"

"I'm wondering. Should we go to the right, or to the left?"

"Why don't you try eenie, meenie, miney, moe?" Ann suggested.

He gave her a sidewise look. "Might at that." But Ann knew she had proved that she could hide her fear. If Charles Boyden thought she was going to faint, or to become hysterical, he had another thought coming!

"We'll go to the left," he said.

"Does that take us to the pool?"

"Either way would. But going to the left leads to the balcony."

"Balcony?"

"Yeh. You can look down into the pool." He nodded. Ann could not see the expression in his eyes, but she knew he was deeply in earnest now. He had taken all the time he dared in assuring himself that she would be equal to the adventure, and now they would proceed. He did not say, "Let's hurry. Every minute counts now." But Ann sensed the strain, the eagerness in his hand on her arm, as they began to move swiftly toward the glow far down to the left.

This was still the hard-packed, earthen floor. It seemed to have a kind of sheen to it. Perhaps because of the moisture. But there were no rocks along the way. They were free to run, and run they did, but kept on their toes. They could not have made much sound. To Ann it seemed like a soft swish-swish, but now the music had stopped, and the voices. Perhaps, to others who were hidden, or waiting near the light, their footsteps were heard. It seemed, with a terrifying suddenness, that they must have been heard; that she and Crunch had surely been discovered.

In rapid succession two changes took place. The glow ahead began to twist against the walls, to lift itself, and then it went out. And the music started up again.

Ann had been aware of the darker places in the wall along the way they had come. She had guessed these were the openings that had been planned to be the doors of the dining rooms. Neither she nor Crunch spoke nor uttered a sound as they were plunged again into darkness. But they both came to a dead standstill. Crunch was nearer to the openings. Ann knew he was groping with one hand to find a hiding place. And in the next instant they left the passage.

They moved close to the rough wall, the wall of one of the smaller rooms. Ann could see nothing to distinguish it from the darkness of the passage, but the ground underfoot was much more uncertain. Sharp stones cut into the leather soles of her slippers. Once her heel slipped, and Crunch caught at her, urging her to stop.

"Somebody's coming!" he whispered.

"Yes—," Ann breathed. She had heard the footsteps, too. "Crunch, do you think—?"

"We'll have to wait, and hope for the best. No, I don't think they heard us. That yowling's going on again."

As the music had done before, so it repeated itself. It grew for a time and then swiftly diminished. It did not cease altogether, but became a background for two voices which came out of the darkness, two voices so near that Ann's heart seemed to stand still, hearing them.

"Took you long enough." This was high, snappish.

"I did my best." A deeper tone, more like a surly growl.

Crunch's mouth was close to Ann's ear. He whispered, "Don't make a sound. They're not on to us. We'll learn something—."

Ann shook her head. Crunch could not see the gesture, but he knew perhaps from the feel of her hair. He whispered, "Attagirl," again and they both pressed against the wall, waiting for what was to come.

The thin, high voice lowered. They missed some of what was said. But they heard this, "It'll go through tonight. We'll give 'em the works. You got the lights working?"

"They're all set."

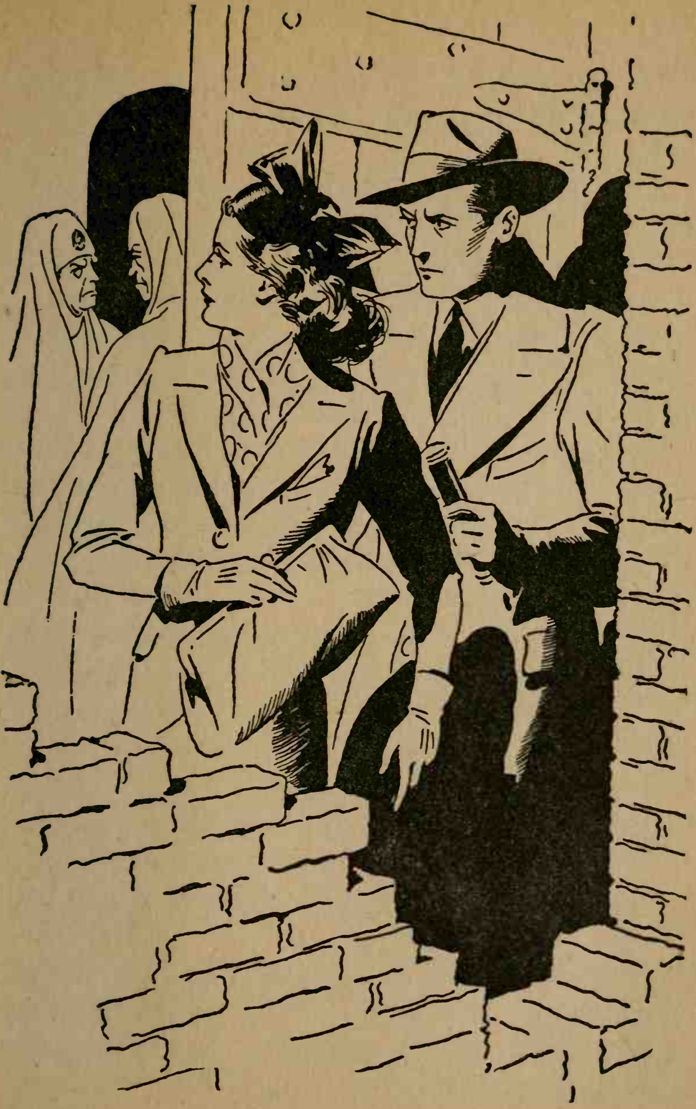
"All right, what are we waiting for?"

There was a pause before the rumbling voice said, "I got this hunch, that's all. I don't like it."

"You don't like it!" Ann could imagine thin lips sneering, eyes like ice cutting into the dark. "Well, you'll have to like it. You're in this too deep."

The deep voice muttered and the other cut in, with a different note. "Come on, buck up. This is the end. What if the De Lane dame didn't kick in as heavy as we thought—?"

Ann drew her breath in sharply. Crunch's hand



They Heard, "We'll Give 'Em the Works."

came up, found her mouth and pressed his fingers against her lips. "Don't—!" he breathed fiercely. "Listen!"

Ann pulled his hand away. "Don't worry about me!"

Crunch said again, "Listen!" And Ann thought, "As though I weren't listening!" She heard the gruff mutter, "I'll say she didn't. Sade got a squint at the *jewels,"* it sounded as though he spat, "and the cash."

"Remember, she's not the only one," the thin voice said persuasively. "We got three more lined up." The smile must have left his mouth, for what came next was like a whiplash. "And they'll *give.* Or else!"

There came a soft, padding sound, as though the sly one were patting the other on the shoulder. "It'll be over in another thirty minutes. Get those lights going on the pool. That'll get 'em."

"I didn't get a chance to try 'em out," the other rumbled. "Suppose they're seen from the river?"

"Who's going to be on the river now?"

"I know. I know. But I got this hunch, see? I don't like it. I never liked it."

"Listen—!" the thin voice hissed. "It makes no difference whether you like it or not! By this time you should have it through your thick skull that I never miss. Get that? I never miss!"

There was a small silence and the voice continued, "Well, do I? Haven't all my plans carried through this far?"

"Sure. But nothin' like this one."

"It's worth it. And if it works here, it'll work some place else. A little different, maybe, but it's a beauty! Sade does a little headwork and they come in and bring us the swag. And after that—Pft! No mess to clean up. Nothing. It's perfect!"

The music and the voices had softened further and presently all was silence. The thin voice became alert. "Sade's got 'em all set up there at the pool. Go on, get those lights working!"

The man muttered something that sounded like, "Got a hunch," and a door must have been opened. It closed again and there came a scratching sound. A light flared and Ann thought, "He lit a match."

It was more than a match, for the light held. The man with the rumbling voice had gone, but the other, who was evidently the master, remained, holding the lighted candle. Some of its fire darted down the passageway, across the opening of the place where Ann and Crunch were pressed close against the wall.

Ann thought wildly, "He's coming down this way. He'll see us!"

But the man remained where he was, satisfied, no doubt, that all was well. The light moved away with his fading footsteps. The sound seemed to go upward, as though the man had gone up a flight of steps.

Ann released her breath, a long drawn sob.

"Oh—Crunch—!"

"They play rough, don't they?" Crunch had moved to the passageway. His hand pulled at Ann's and she stood beside him again. Crunch said swiftly, "The boss went up to the balcony over the pool. It looks as though the show's ready to start there. Sade must be the woman with the purple hat affair. She's up there, too."

That accounted for two of them. But they could be positive there were three. There was the rough-voiced man who had gone to see about the lights. Crunch had omitted mentioning him, because he thought that man was out of their way. But Ann's thoughts clung to that dull, rumbling voice. That man was afraid, worried. He thought maybe "the lights" would be seen from the river. And with all her heart, Ann wished that this might be true; that their plan might somehow miscarry; that help might come.

But the one who had engineered this hateful business did not appear to be fearful of the outcome. He never failed, he said. And this plan was perfect. Definitely, Lacey had been duped into whatever they meant to do. Lacey, and three others, were here now at the pool.

The mystic pool! The deep, deep pool!

They were hurrying there now, running. Every now and then Crunch would snap on the flashlight.

Ann did not protest. It was reasonably certain that the way was clear for them. When it became dangerous to proceed, they would receive a warning from the lights ahead of them, the lights around the pool.

The steps they mounted were of stone. And they went up slowly, it seemed. That was because they were low and wide. There was one small upward step, then a space where they walked. Halfway to the top, the stairs took an abrupt turn to the left, and from this point Ann could see the radiance that was like the last streaks of a sunset. Streamers of red and gold and orange misted down from overhead.

Crunch muttered, "He's got the lights working," and again they flattened themselves against a wall, the wall on either side of the stairs. "Come over on this side," Crunch whispered, reaching for Ann's hand. "I think it's safer. The lights are coming from this direction. If we lie low, maybe they'll miss us."

Bending her head, Ann crept over the steps to his side. They stood looking upward, watching the streamers. The stairs were tinted now and shone clearly, but to Ann the darkness was preferable. The light did nothing to soften the crumbling stone.

But it did warn them of what might have been catastrophe.

A few steps upward, one wall had either fallen, or had never been built, for to the one side was a yawning pit of blackness, with only a twisted railing over the opening. Crunch saw it, even as Ann did. "Be a good idea to stay on this side all the way up," he muttered grimly. His head lifted. "Aren't those lights dimming?"

They were.

Ann gripped his arm. "Crunch, I've got an idea now. Couldn't we crawl up the rest of the way? Even if they turned on the lights brighter again, they'd be over our heads."

"Nothing like trying," Crunch said softly, and dropped to his knees. "I'll go first."

So they went up the remainder of the stairs on hands and knees. The shimmer of reds passed high over them, searched for them, but they kept hidden. Ann felt sure they could not be seen.

The music began again and the voices. They seemed at a distance. If the woman, Sade, were with Lacey and the others, they were at the far end of the pool. Perhaps the thin-voiced man was with them.

If Ann's knees had suffered before, they ached now with ascending the rocky way. The palms of her hands were stiff and sore. Now and then she would shift her purse which was a serious obstacle. It meant she could only fully use her free hand.

Crunch was ahead all the way. He looked like a round dark stone, except for the soles of his shoes. Ann tried to keep her eyes on his shoes. She tried to think of each step carefully, because each step would bring them nearer, nearer to the pool where Lacey was. In that way she would not look over to the other side where the wall had fallen. But she knew that abyss of blackness was there.

The fear that had smoldered in her heart seemed to flame as they reached the top at last. High overhead was a roof of some sort. The light did not reach there. but was trained downward from a point about halfway across the length of a strip of water. Ann did not see it all in a glance. She knew they stood on some kind of balcony. There was a walled-in place going around the pool, and she and Crunch walked over to that wall. Then she looked down. It was like looking into a deep pit, only the pit was filled with water. The lights were coming down on the surface, not on the figures standing at the opposite end of the pool itself.

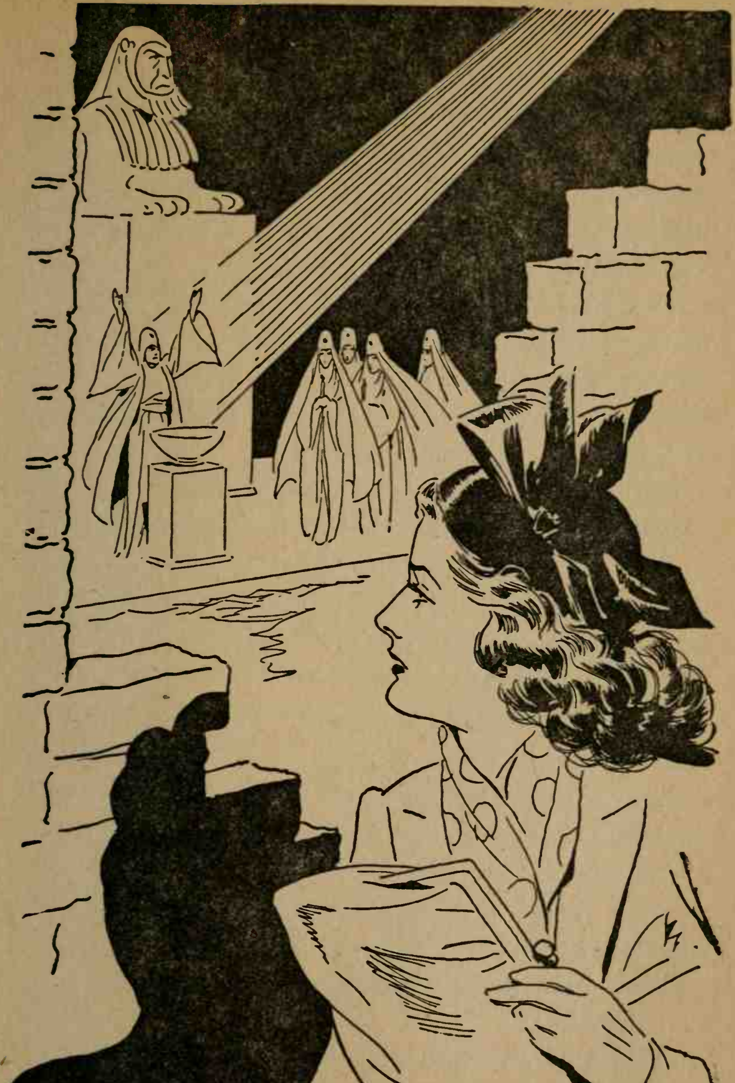
They were indistinct, the people there. All looked more like so many blurred white robes. Looking over the wall, Ann thought she counted five ghostly outlines. She thought swiftly, "Lacey is there. And the woman. And the three others. That would make five."

It was Crunch who saw the image of the sphinx. Ann did not know then why he drew her suddenly away, along the balcony, nearer to where the white robes were stationed. She thought it was so that they might be nearer to Lacey. So that they might be ready to help her away.

She heard him say, "Did you see that?" Ann thought he meant the way the hands of the figures were lifting. They were all making the same motion. The sleeves made it easier to see the hands, lifting and moving. The white robes seemed to be swaying.

But Crunch stopped after they had gone almost to the center of the pool and pointed backward, and then Ann saw the image. It was an ugly thing, with none of the dignity of the famed statue. Like the costumes Ann had seen on Lacey and the woman, it had an amateurish look. If it had not been for the red-inked invitations, she might not have associated it at all with what it was intended to look like, but having seen them, having wondered about their meaning, Ann knew this was meant to be the sign that Lacey and the other foolish ones had followed. There was the woman's head, the bulging shoulders which might have belonged to either bird or animal, the large, crouching claws.

She heard Crunch whisper, "They'll light up that



Ann Saw the Image

thing next. We don't want to be near it."

"N-o!" Ann breathed, thinking what it would be like to be there if the light should suddenly be trained on the statue. "It's probably made of papier-mache," she guessed. "It's all part of this horrible make-believe. This isn't real!"

But to those figures in white it had meaning enough. They were singing together, if it could be called singing, and swaying with their hands over their heads. One voice came out over the others, the voice of the woman in purple.

Ann placed her, a little apart from the others. She was like some high priestess in this heathen shrine.

The lights moved over the water, never coming as far as the image of the sphinx, and never touching the white costumes. They seemed concentrated on the water, and Ann thought she heard something of sense in the chant. It sounded like, *"The mystic pool. Peace is here. Beauty is here."* Where the stringed instrument was hidden, Ann did not know, but it never stopped.

The music went on. The voices went on.

Ann found herself beginning to sway slightly. Against her will, she felt herself being drawn with those white figures under some kind of spell.

"Ann—?"

She shook her head to clear it. "Yes, Crunch—?"

"We've got to break this thing up."

"How? How can we?" Ann knew that this was what they must do. Break the hateful charm. They must get Lacey away from here. Quickly. Because this was only the beginning. Lacey had been taken into the so-called secrets of this organization, but she would never be permitted to reveal what she knew. Lacey would never leave this place. Nor would those others.

For Ann, the enchantment had lifted. Her head was clear, her thoughts racing wildly. She studied the pool once again. The white-robed figures were far away, to the extreme right, and below them. That must mean there was another stairway at the opposite end of the pool.

The lights were coming from a place above the center of the pool. That meant the heavy-voiced man was there.

It seemed they had only to deal with the woman in the purple headdress. She was the only member of this group who was near Lacey.

And then Ann thought of the thin-voiced man, the one who was evidently the leader.

Where was he?

Crunch had a biting hold on her arm. He said, close to her ear, "Wait here a minute. I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?"

"Over there." He motioned to the grim statue rising over their heads. "I'm going to investigate that thing."

"Investigate—?"

"I think it's a fake. I mean, it looks to me like it's made of paper."

They were both looking at the crouching figure, but it was Ann who first made the discovery. "Crunch—wait! Its eyes—see? They're red."

He was eager to go. "What of it?"

"I mean, maybe *somebody's inside it,* don't you see? Maybe—?"

"I don't think so. It's big enough, but it's my guess that's colored glass. The lights reflect against it." He patted her hand. "I'm only going to be gone for a few minutes. Wait here."

"But—why?"

"Tell you later." And he had left her side.

For minutes that seemed endless, Ann watched his bent shoulders moving along the balcony wall. There was a space where the wall was broken, and Ann thought wildly, "Suppose the lights should change? Crunch would be seen then!"

In her alarm, she had lifted herself to an almost upright position, and a second warning thought came, "They'd see me, too!" And she contented herself with bending low again. She could not see Crunch now. He had reached the image of the sphinx, had probably gone around to the back of it.

But she could still look downward through a crack in the low wall. She could still see the row of white-robed figures, swaying, swaying. But Ann remained above the mysterious spell. Fear for Crunch, fear for Lacey and fear for her own self kept her beyond the enchantment of the weird, beating sing-song.

And so she saw fully what was happening. The woman with the purple headdress advanced before the others. She held something in her hand, something that looked like a large-mouthed bowl. It was of bronze, or gilded, for it gave off a dull glow.

Slowly, majestically, she came before the group and placed the bowl on a stone before them. Her hand went upward and silence fell, so heavy that Ann prayed Crunch had come away from the statue. The slightest sound he might make would betray him.

She looked backward once, but caught no glimpse of his stooped-over shoulders. "All I can do is hope for the best!" Ann thought fervently. "And keep my eyes open!" she added grimly.

The lights changed. The red and orange tones were blotted out, and a deep blue shot down over the pool. Ann could not see the figures as well as she had before, but when the woman spoke, she heard every word.

"Beauty lies in the deep, deep pool," she intoned slowly. "Beauty—and peace."

The others mourned after her, "Beauty—and peace."

"Seek for beauty," chanted the woman. "Seek for peace. You are bidden."

"We—are bidden," came their answer.

Ann felt a cold chill down her back. "Now, what?" she asked herself. And wished with all her heart that Crunch would come back to her side.

The woman motioned to the golden bowl which was now a dull green in the light. "Bring your gift," she said hollowly, and her wide sleeve seemed like the wing of some tortured bird. "Bring your gift, that you may receive the perfect gift. Beauty—and peace forever."

Alone, without the aid of the weird music, the woman began a wordless chant. Her hands remained over the bowl, moving to right, to left.

At first there was no movement in the group, but presently the first moved forward. It might be Lacey, and it might not. Ann could not be certain. But she thought it was not. The third figure in the group she believed was the woman they had come to rescue. This one who slowly advanced toward the green-glowing bowl seemed of slighter build.

"But no matter if it's Lacey or not," Ann thought frantically, "we can't just stand here and watch this going on. We've got to *do something!*"

She looked again in the direction Crunch had taken, and this time, with a sigh of unbounded relief, she saw him coming toward her. He, too, sensed the need to hurry, for he was risking the blue light, almost moving along at his full height.

When he came to her side, he paused only to take a quick breath. "Ann," he said, "this is going to take teamwork."

"Oh, I know it! What are we going to do?"

He peered down at the group. "What's going on now?"

"They're coming to that urn, or whatever it is. Putting in their gifts."

"I heard her calling for the collection." Crunch spoke without reverence, but Ann sensed that he was white with rage against the proceeding, even as she was. "Now, listen. I'm going down there."

"Then so am I!" Ann flared.

"Quiet!" The man tapped her shoulder, though she had spoken scarcely above a whisper. "No, you're going to stay here. There's something you've got to do, Ann. I told you this would take teamwork."

"All right. What should I do?"

"That thing back there," Crunch motioned with his head to the sphinx, now a misty blue. "I looked it over. It's a fake, like I thought."

"Made of paper?"

"Something like that. Cloth, too. It's just a shell."

He pushed Ann a little to one side, the better to see the moving figures below them.

Ann said, "Crunch, what do you want me to do? We've got to hurry!"

"Not too much," he assured her. "There'll be time. The second one's going over now. This thing has got to be handled just right, see? The way I have it figured, the fireworks won't start until they all come across. Then they either jump, or get pushed into the pool."

Ann shuddered. "Isn't it—savage? Why do they?"

"Go to all that trouble?" Crunch finished. "You've got me. Why do it at all? The man's insane, if you ask me."

The girl gave a small, drawn out, "O—oh," which Crunch seemed not to hear. He was reaching into his coat pocket. His fist came out and a moment later he was pressing something into Ann's hand.

"Matches," he said. "You'll set fire to that thing."

"The—sphinx?"

"That's right. I'll get on down there. About the time I reach them, the third one will be coming through. Things'll be running so smoothly, the gang won't suspect a thing. But they'll be jittery. Ready for the finale. When the fire starts, it'll break it up—then—?"

"Then, what?" Ann breathed.

"I don't know, exactly. I'll try to get 'em out the other way, down along that side of the pool. Think you could find your way back—the way we came?"

Ann's eyes explored the way along the wall. She thought of the stairway with the broken wall, the dark passage, the door, the second passage—and then the blessed fresh air.

"I can make it!" she heard herself saying confidently.

"Swell. You got the matches?"

Of course she had them. They were crushed in the palm of her hand. She held them more carefully, remembering not one must be lost.

"All right," Crunch gave her a small prod. "Get going. I'm starting out now."

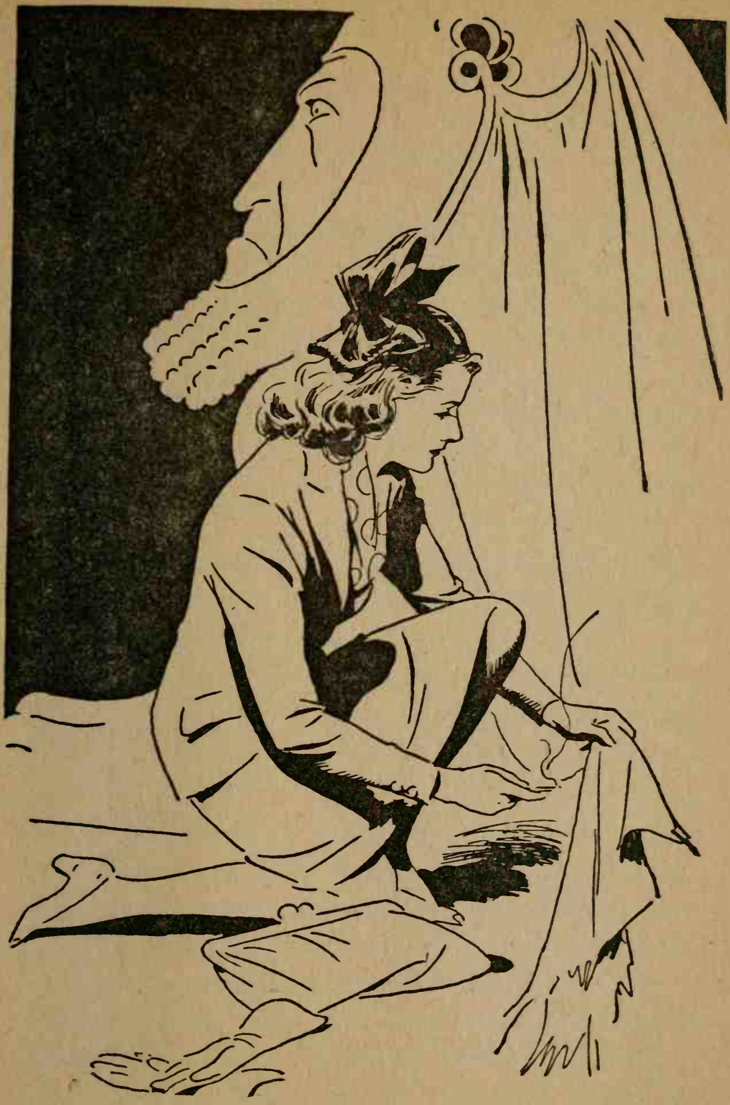
As Crunch had done, Ann bent her shoulders as she went along the balcony. She felt numb, as though she could not force her feet to move fast enough. Crunch might believe there was plenty of time, but Ann did not think so. "Hurry! Hurry!" Some inner voice was pleading. Her left hand felt as though it were asleep, useless. Ann realized that she had been clutching her purse in her left hand. She changed, making her right hand hold the purse, putting the matches in her numb fingers. "I'll need both hands!" she thought. "I'll have to work fast. Even if it is only cloth, only a shell, maybe it won't start to burn right away." And then she thought, *"Maybe somebody is there now!"*

Crunch had seen no one near the image. He would have told her if he had. He would not have let her go. But someone could be there—now. Maybe the master mind of this gang would appear in some disguise near those grasping claws. Maybe—

Thought ceased then, for Ann had come to the break in the wall. She went down to her knees and crawled on, until she came to the base of the image. Desperately, holding to the jagged boulders that were its foundation, she crept around it and to the back. She was screened from the blue light now. Even the voices seemed far away. She could stand to her full height, and did so, suffering a tremor of sharp pain.

But aching muscles would be no deterrent. Ann pushed herself forward, casting a quick eye about her. As Crunch had said, this was only a shell. What Ann saw was a mound of tattered paper, shreds of cloth-like stuff. There was nothing of the stern red-eyed sphinx.

When she took a forward step, there was a resulting rustle of crushed paper. But if she could not hear the voices, certainly the slight sound she made would pass unnoticed. Ann took another step, and another. She came into a hollowed out place, perhaps the arm of the image, or of what was supposed to be the arm. She made no effort to find out what it was, but raised her purse and struck one of the



She Knelt and Struck a Match

matches there. It blazed brightly. Ann turned the wood down, let the flame grow an instant, and then carefully touched it to the frazzled end of some kind of cloth.

Like a hungry tongue, the flame licked along. It shot straight inward, toward the image, and then shot higher, higher. Quickly, the girl stepped back and groped her way to the other side. There she lighted another match. This one did not burn so swiftly. The paper must have been damp. "And I have to hurry!" Ann said aloud, wildly. "Crunch has gone down there. Maybe it's time now—maybe it's too late!"

The thing Ann wanted to do was to bring the flame as close to the watchers below as possible. That would mean going farther into the flimsy image. Her hand went out, groping, and found what seemed like a hanging sheet of cloth. She pushed it farther aside, held it back, and struck another match.

This brought such a sudden and fierce result that Ann ventured again. She found she had but one match left. "If I could light that face—burn that hateful face!" she thought, moving inward. The last match flared up, up, and flames seemed to shoot all about her. Not too near. She could easily get back to the balcony. She could rush back to the stairs now, back to the passage. She would wait there for

Crunch.

But Ann did not reach the safety of the balcony. She had kept herself from the eating fire, but not from another and an unseen danger.

She heard the splintering sound even as she felt the boards give under her feet. She was falling, falling in a mass of flame.

Her hands flew out before her, and found something, some ledge. Back of her, the way she had come was closed by a door of fire. There was no going back—that way. Ann pushed on ahead. She thought. "I'm inside this thing. I'm moving toward the pool!"

It was black ahead, except where the flames danced. Ann saw only the blackness and the gleaming red. Smoke rose chokingly.

And then she pushed against something that gave way before her. She was out in the open. There was a flash of blue light, shining on the water below. Ann lifted her head high, gave one ringing cry, and leaped downward.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ANSWERING A RIDDLE

Ann opened her eyes slowly. The lids seemed weighted down. She closed them again and waited. She thought vaguely, "Something happened. But I'm not sure what it was. I'll have to think back."

She made a discovery then.

"I'm in bed. My head is on a pillow."

It was with a terrific effort that she opened her eyes. "This is a dream. I've had a dream and now I'm waking up," she thought. "Sometimes it's so hard to wake up."

Her eyes were opened. Light was coming in, it seemed, through a window. Ann looked at the white, criss-cross ruffles and thought, "I've never been here before." And then she heard a voice that brought her wide awake.

"Ann—! Oh, honey—! Oh, my dear!"

Ann's head turned the other way, to the other side of the bed. She thought, "That's Tess." But how unlike Tess! She was affectionate enough, but not gushy. She said, wonderingly, "Is that you, Tess?"

"Oh—Ann!" Fingers were pressing her hand.

"My dear, I thought you'd never wake up."

"Is it time to get up?" Ann raised herself on one elbow. Hands were on her shoulders, pressing her gently back again, but Ann did not need the hands. Her strength seemed to have been drained from her. She lay back again on the pillow.

But now she knew. Now she remembered.

There was a little quiet and then she said, "I fell in the pool. didn't I?"

Tess said, gently, pityingly, "Don't talk—not yet, dear. You're all right. Everything's all right."

Ann said, vaguely, "Is it?" And again came the awareness. Her eyes flew wide open. She forgot the pain that urged her to lie down, pushed away Tess's ministering hands and sat bolt upright.

"Tess—! Is Lacey—?"

"She's all right, I tell you."

"And Crunch?"

Tess came nearer, put her arm around the girl's shoulders. "They're all—fine. Now, honey, you must take it easy. Try to relax."

Ann shook her head. "Please, Tess. Those—those others?"

"Now, my dear," Tess sounded firm, "you'll have to be patient. The doctor's orders—"

"Doctor!" Ann cried.

"Yes, doctor. You've been a sick little girl."

"I don't believe it," Ann said stoutly. "I never felt better in my life." This was not strictly true. Her cheeks felt hot and her knees ached. When she moved her shoulders a twinge shot through them. She frowned at her friend. "I'm going to get up," she announced.

"Oh, no you're not. Not till you've had breakfast."

Ann looked around for a clock. It was pleasant to look around in this room. The walls were a soft pink, the ceiling blue. A foamy dressing table stood before a window near the foot of her bed. There was a small rocker, a frilled stool, a chest of drawers. But no clock.

Ann said, "What time is it, Tess?"

"Almost noon. So maybe we'd better call it brunch instead." She gave the girl a beseeching look. "Can't you believe me, honey, and be a good child? After you've eaten, I promise you can get up."

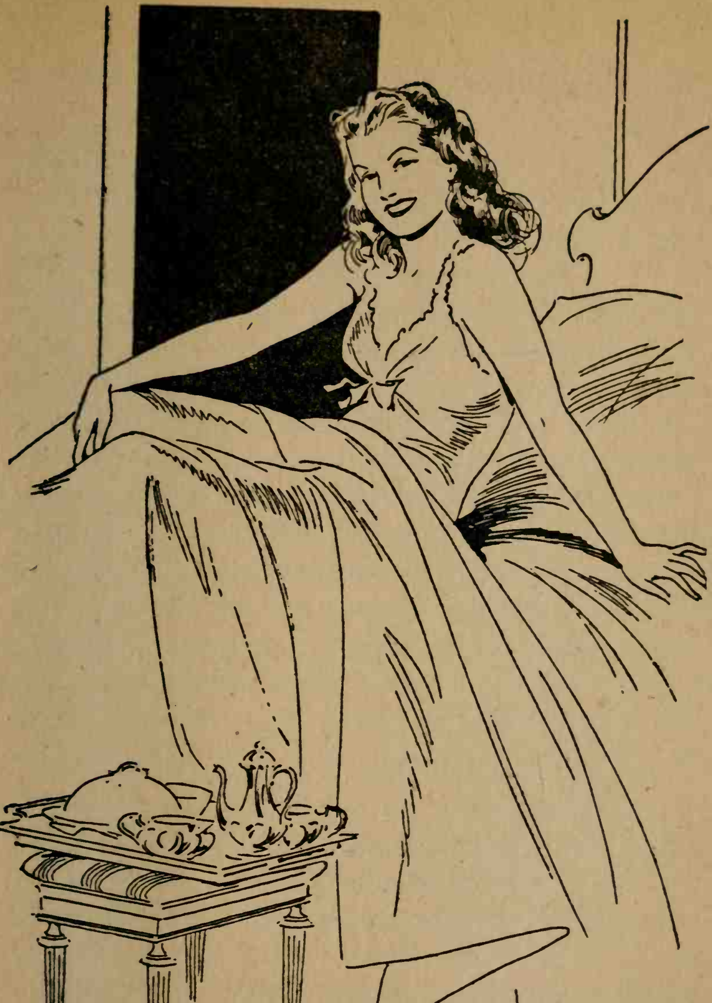
"And have Crunch come over?"

"And have Crunch come over."

"All right," Ann leaned back on the pillows. "I'll try."

Tess's smile was a reward as she went out, softly closing the door after her. Ann thought, "Thank goodness, I can talk to Crunch. He'll tell me what's what."

Before long the tray came in. Ann ate with enjoyment and zest. Tess, watching her, said, "Poor



Ann Said, "What Time Is It?"

child. I should have taken you to dinner with me last night. I seem to have failed you."

"Failed me nothing," Ann told her. "And, Tess, please leave out the 'poor child.' I've been doing a woman's work."

Tess Whitehouse was wearing a lavender wool dress with a white collar. Her face went suddenly as white as that collar, and Ann said in quick contrition, "I'm sorry, Tess. I really will behave. But after you've followed a—a riddle this far, you'd kind of appreciate knowing the complete answer."

As though her thoughts were driving her, Tess went to one of the windows. She said, so that Ann could scarcely hear her, "If anything had happened to you, my dear—!"

Ann drank the last drop of milk in the generous tumbler and put the tray on the table at her bedside. "But nothing happened to me," she said cheerfully, and, to change the subject, "Shouldn't you be at the shop, Tess?"

The woman turned to her. "Jacky's there," she said. "She can manage until—"

"Until what?" Ann pressed her. She had given her promise to wait, but could not. Strength was coming back, and an eagerness she could not suppress.

"Until Gail gets back." Tess sounded reluctant.

Ann pushed on. "Back from where?"

Tess smiled then, faintly, but she actually smiled. "Back from the hospital, you imp. Lacey's in the hospital."

Ann dropped her eyes. "I'll take it easy," she told herself, "and I'll find out." She looked up innocently. "In the hospital? Was she hurt, Tess?"

"No. Just suffering from shock, Gail says. She's all right." Tess came over to the bed. "And that's all for now. I've got some things ready for you to slip on. Your clothes were a wreck."

"I imagine they were," Ann admitted. "You try jumping off a burning sphinx into a mystic pool."

Tess's face put on ten years. She cried, "Oh—Ann!" And the girl threw back the covers and leaped from the bed. The pajamas that had been loaned to her were a trifle long and she stumbled over the lacy edge, but she came to Tess without mishap and threw her arms around the older woman.

"Can't you see it's over now?" she said. "It was all like—like a bad dream. I'm here—and you're here—and we'll all be all right. You said so yourself, Tess!"

"But when I think of it!" the woman seated herself on the edge of the bed. "It doesn't seem—possible!"

Nor did it to Ann. It did not seem possible. Here, in Tess's home, surrounded by warmth and comfort and cheer, the adventure in the lonely villa seemed never to have been. Or it seemed that it had happened to someone else, a second self.

Tess produced a beige silk dress that fitted surprisingly well, slippers and silk hose. "Silk!" Tess said. "The real thing. My last pair." And saw to it that Ann took them.

The living room, as Ann had expected, was long and lovely. There were the books, the pictures. There were Lit and Lotto, arching their amber backs, purring out their hearts as she meted out to each his share of affection. But Ann was not giving the room nor anyone in it her undivided attention. She was waiting for Crunch to come.

The telephone had rung several times. Once Ann answered it. Jacky Dahl was calling to know if Tess could possibly come down. The WHITEHOUSE was doing a terrific business.

Ann was grateful for the chance to get in a word with Jacky.

"You're all right?" she asked her and thought how often Tess had been saying that: "All right. Everyone's all right."

Jacky assured her that she was perfect. Her concern was for Ann, but Ann brushed that aside. Jacky asked, "What was it all about?" Ann said, "I don't exactly know. But if you think Tess should come down, I don't see why she can't. I feel grand. I'll have to be leaving soon now—"

Tess came in then. She spoke to Jacky and hung up. She said to Ann, "Leaving—!"

"Of course, Tess. Can't you believe I'm off the sick list? Why don't you go down to the shop? I'll come there later and we'll have dinner. Then I'll take my train out."

Tess gave in. And so when Crunch arrived, there were only Lit and Lotto prowling around, two beautiful cats whose lives were far removed from a lonely wood on a March night. They offered no murmur of concern or regret, and Ann could ask her questions to her utmost satisfaction.

Crunch looked like a healthy young man who had slept well. He wore a dark blue suit today, and looked thinner. He greeted Ann with a sidewise smile, most approving. "Well, partner in crime. When you go to break things up—you mean it!"

"Break things up!" Ann said, and remembered that was his last order to her. To light up the image, to break up the spell that hung over the misty blue pool. And the memory of last night returned in all its horror. She could see the figures far below, swaying to the woman's chant. She could see Crunch, moving along the balcony toward them. She could feel herself falling, hear herself cry out, feel the impact of the water, the icy, icy chill of that water.

Her hands were stiff when she caught at his sleeve, drew him to the sofa before the fire.

"Tell me everything, Crunch—everything! Did you get down there to them in time?"

He sat down, carefully attending the creases in his trousers. Ann was annoyed at the little gesture. "Oh—Crunch!"

"Let me get my breath. I don't feel as bright as you do."

"Who said I felt bright? And anyway, it doesn't matter how I feel—*Tell me!*"

He grinned at her. "Seems to me you could tell me a few things, too. If I ever got scared it was when you stood there, screaming to high heaven. And then, when you dived in—!"

"I didn't dive—I fell."

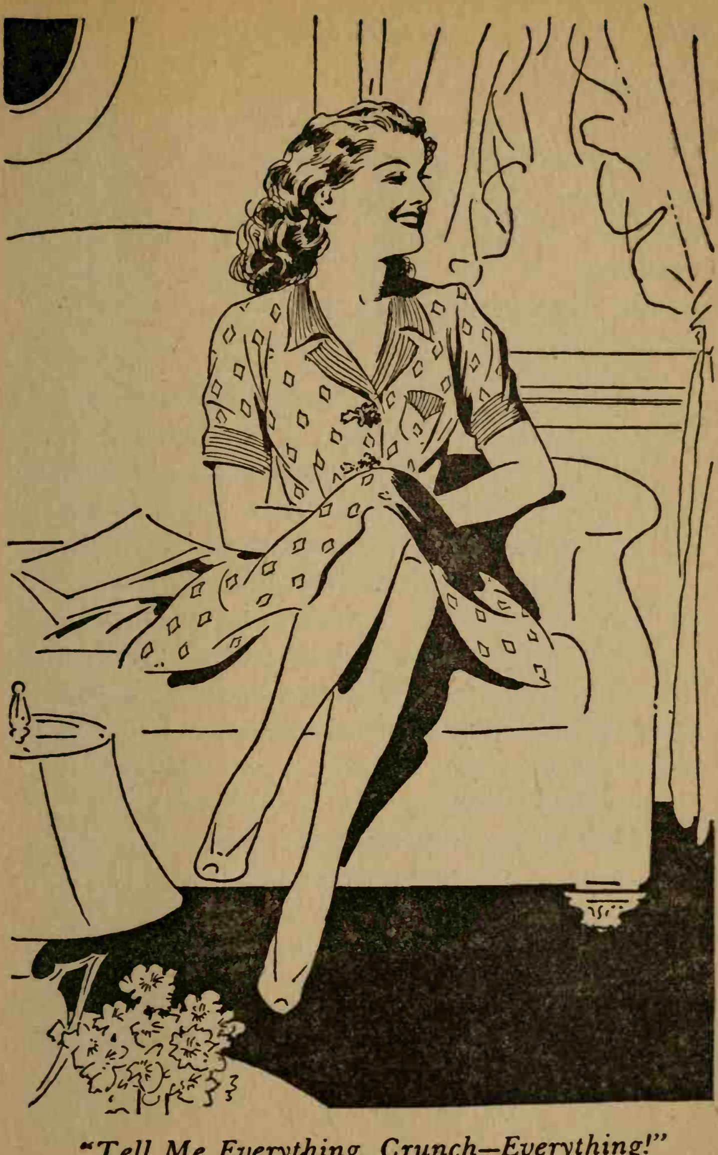
"You dived, lady. And it was a beaut!"

"All right—I dived. Then what happened?"

Crunch frowned, trying to remember the exact details. "Well, I was plenty worried about you, let me tell you. The water wasn't deep enough, you see. Not for that kind of a dive. You were out—cold."

Ann said, weakly, "Oh, was I?" Her hand went to her head, pushing back the tumble of her curls. "I don't remember."

"I hauled you out," Crunch said placidly. "And to tell you the truth—" he paused and Ann looked at him quickly. His face was very serious. "Well," he shrugged, "all's well that ends well. You're a brick,



"Tell Me Everything, Crunch—Everything!"

partner."

Ann said, briefly, "Thanks." She frowned. "But if you got me out of the pool, Crunch, what about Lacey—and the rest? And that gang? Where are *they?*"

"Somewhere that's safe. Where they won't pull any more hocus-pocus stuff."

"You mean they're—?"

"In jail. The police came in the nick of time." He took a deep breath. "Thanks to Unc."

Ann's hands were folded on her knees. She bent toward him. "Oh, Crunch, don't make me ask a thousand questions. Tell me, can't you?"

"I am telling you. Unc called the police."

"When?"

"When—? Before we went there. After I left. Oh, what does it matter? He didn't like the whole set-up, Lacey running in and out like that. He knew something was up."

"So did we," Ann put in.

"So did we," Crunch agreed. "But Unc had foresight in the matter. He called Matsen."

"Who's Matsen?"

"A pal at headquarters. They came along the river road."

Ann breathed, "Oh—along the river road. And when did they get there, Crunch?"

"About the time you completed your swan dive," the man said. "When I wasn't sure which way was up."

Ann looked at him for a thoughtful minute. "It must have been awful," she said slowly. "You had me on your hands, and all the rest of them. I—I wasn't much help, was I?"

"I'd like to know what you call it!" Crunch growled. "You were sent to break up the meeting—and you broke it! You should have seen them scatter! And just in time, too. They were about set to push the followers into the pool."

"Oh!" Ann gave a sharp cry. "They wouldn't have had a *chance,* would they? Those—costumes!"

Crunch looked down at his hands. "They wouldn't have had a chance," he said grimly. "That's what they meant by no mess—remember?"

Ann said, "Yes—I remember."

Lit, or Lotto, she was not certain which one it was, came rubbing against her ankle. She put down her hand, stroking the warm, silky fur.

"Pretty, aren't they?" Crunch said. "I don't go for cats, but they're something." He looked up, missing Tess for the first time. "Tess go to the shop?" he asked. "She told me to walk right in—I figured she'd be home."

"No, she's down there. Jacky was alone. Gail's at the hospital!" Ann drew her hand away from the silken back. "Crunch, tell me about Lacey."

"Tell you what? She's coming along fine. Gail expects to have her home tonight—tomorrow for sure."

"I don't mean that," Ann shook her head. "I mean, how she happened to get mixed up in—everything. Did you find out?"

A smile played about the man's mouth. "Unc did. Leave it to Unc. He wants some more of that apple pie."

Ann said, reprovingly, "You ought to be proud of your uncle. Maybe you don't approve of his dancing—"

"Do you?"

"Why, I certainly do!"

"Well—that's you. It's different with me. The fellows ask, 'What business is he in?' and I say—well, you figure it out. It has its drawbacks."

"He thinks you're ashamed of him."

"I'm not. I think he's great. If it hadn't been for him—well, as I was saying, he had a little talk with Gail."

Ann prodded, "And—?"

"It seems she—Lacey, I mean—met this woman Sade in—guess where—a movie theater!"

Ann said, shrugging, "Why not? Everybody goes to the movies."

"Umm," Crunch said.

"Is that all?" Ann asked. "I mean do you know how they met? How Lacey got to know about that—

that—mystic pool?"

Crunch spread his hands. "I haven't had a chance to go into the details. All I know is it was between shows. The woman sat down next to Lacey—in the lounge. They got to talking about this and that. And Sade planted that beauty idea."

"Beauty idea," Ann said slowly. "It's funny, isn't it, Crunch, when Gail's business is just that?"

Crunch nodded. "Gail thought of that, too. That's what makes her feel so rummy."

"Why should Gail feel badly? It isn't her fault."

"She thinks it was. As she put it, a shoemaker's children never have shoes. She was dishing out the beauty dope to women in droves, and Lacey was a little Cinderella by the fire—out of it all."

Ann shook her head. "But she couldn't have been, Crunch. Gail loves her—really."

"Oh, sure, sure. You know and I know. I've seen Gail almost fall up those stairs when she'd come home from work. She couldn't get her high heels off fast enough. I bet the first thing she'd do would be to get into some comfortable thing-a-ma-jig."

"I think I understand now," Ann said sagely. "Gail thought Lacey was just perfect the way she was. And Lacey thought—"

"Lacey thought Gail was ashamed of her."

Ann gave a deep sigh. "It's hard isn't it, knowing the best thing to do all the time, the thing that is going to be really helpful?"

"If you ask me," Crunch grunted, "it's impossible."

Ann got up and walked to the fireplace. The flames were dying there, but she scarcely noticed their flickering lights. Crunch rose, too, and took a step toward the door. Ann turned. "Wait, Crunch. There's something more I want to ask you."

He said, "Well?" and Ann laughed shakily. "I suppose the questions will be coming back long after I've gone. I'll think about this—and wonder—"

"Don't. The best thing is to—forget it. It's all over. Everything turned out great."

"I know—but I was thinking about when you saw her in the bank. Lacey did take her money then. And those were Gail's jewels in that little sack, weren't they?"

"Of course. A small diamond and a ruby. Neither very valuable. Don't you remember that woman with the purple business on her head? She was disgusted about it."

"Yes, but they were valuable to Gail, I'll bet. Did they get them back again?"

"Every last thing. All piled in that big jar."

"Did the others get their money, too?"

Crunch nodded, and Ann stood, biting her lips. "Did you know any of them, Crunch?"

"Nope. And I'm not trying to. The place went up in the fire, you know."

Ann's eyes widened. "You mean the villa?"

"That's right. Everything that could burn—did." His teeth showed in the wide smile he flashed her. "When you make up your mind to start a fire, lady —you do!"

Ann grinned. "I aim to please," she said.

Crunch put out his hand. "That's better." Ann put her hand in his. They shared a smile and a handshake and a farewell.

"Remember," Crunch said, "no looking back. The old sphinx couldn't keep the answer to that riddle. She was supposed to keep secrets, wasn't she? Or was it he?"

Ann said. "She."

"She told, then." He still had her hand and he gave it a last firm grip. "Good luck, Ann."

"Good luck, Crunch."

His hat was on a chair. A delicate little chair, tufted in gold. Going to the door, ready to leave, he stopped once more. "Tess taking you to your train?"

"Yes. I'm going down after awhile and have dinner with her, and then I'll leave."

"Maybe I'll see you sometime. Maybe you'll be coming around where I'll be."

Ann smiled impishly up into his face. "I'll sing for you then." Tongue in her cheek, she considered a title. "How about Scotland's Burning?"

Crunch said, "Swell—!" and went out the door. He turned once, waved, and Ann closed the door after him.

The two cats, purring, were almost under her feet. Ann looked down at them. Two mouths, pink and pointed, mewed for her attention.

"Poor dears." Ann bent and scooped one on either arm. They seemed to mould themselves against her. Slowly, enjoying the warmth, the softness of them, she walked back into the room. "A little luck," she murmured, "and a lot of hard work." The cats meowed louder. "All right," Ann promised, "we'll go and see if there isn't a little cream in the ice-box."

There was a quart of milk in the immaculate refrigerator. "We'll take off the top," Ann told the cats. "Tess will have to do without her vitamin A this once."

Standing there, leaning against the red and white walls, the peace of the world she knew seeped through Ann. Not a deadly kind of peace, but the quiet you had to work for, and fight for. Real beauty, she thought, and real peace came from trying to help a friend.

Lit, or Lotto, looked up into her face. It seemed the lovely animal gave one short "Meow!" that spoke emphatic agreement.

Ann laughed. Then her face sobered. "I lost my purse," she thought. "I must have dropped it when I—when I jumped—."

But she wasn't to think of that anymore. She looked around the little kitchen. The cupboards were red, with white borders all around. Birds were painted across the top. Fat, funny little birds. In the window over the sink was some sort of a plant in a lavender bowl. On the table was a snowy white cloth. Looking down, Ann noticed there was a paper there, a hastily scrawled note. It said, "Milkman, leave two quarts of milk, one-half pint of cream."

The cats had finished with their treat. They were rubbing against her again. "It's all right," Ann told them. "The purse didn't matter—and the—the silly letters in it don't matter any more either. We'll get along, won't we?"

Lit and Lotto said that they certainly would.

In the little mirror over the sink, Ann caught a glimpse of her face.

"I'm a sight!" she said aloud. "I'll take time to really do my hair—and maybe a little liquid powder would cover up that scratch on my cheek." The cats were looking up at her with frank admiration, assured she needed nothing more. Ann bent again and scooped them into her arms. "You're nice," she said. "When I'm all through with my job and the world settles down again, I'll have two of you, all my own."

Lit and Lotto purred.

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